

# BANDWAGON

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2011

**THE DONALDSON LITHO CO.**  
THE LEADING AND LARGEST SHOW PRINTING  
HOUSE IN THE WORLD.

*NEWPORT* OPPOSITE CINCINNATI *KENTUCKY*



WE MAKE FORCEFUL COMPELLING POSTERS  
WHICH FASTEN ON THE ATTENTION  
AND HOLD IT UNTIL THEIR STORY SINKS IN.  
OUR HAND-BILLS ARE THE BEST THAT  
ARE MADE IN AMERICA.



# BANDWAGON

**The Journal Of The Circus Historical Society**

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FRED D. PFENING III

EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

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## OUR COVER

While the Donaldson Lithograph Company printed circus posters for at least half a century, very little of its work before the 1920s survives. That, unfortunately, is the norm for field show printers with the exception of Strobbridge. After all, circus posters' life expectancy was measured in weeks, and there was no apparent reason to keep them once they had performed their function of advertising an upcoming circus.

We know little about Donaldson's lithographs over most of the company's existence because so few of them exist. This creates a tendency to dismiss Donaldson, along with many other printers that flourished a century ago, as a small-time supplier that didn't have much impact on circus iconography.

Such an interpretation does

Donaldson a great disservice. The company was an important vendor to the show business, outdoor and indoor. While its core business was providing posters and handbills to smaller circuses, it created images for Buffalo Bill, Ringling Bros., Forepaugh-Sells, Great Wallace, even Barnum and Bailey.

Our cover shows a Donaldson advertisement that appeared on the back cover of the December 6, 1902 *Billboard*. One presumes the company had no difficulty reserving this desirable location in the magazine since its editor, William H. Donaldson, was the son of the lithograph house's founder. Original in Pfening Archives.

## ERRATUM

In "Pete Cristiani Remembers—Part IV" in the July-August *Bandwagon*, the author's name was inadvertently not published. He was, of course, Lane

Talburt, to whom the editor apologizes for such an egregious omission.

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## Greetings To All!

and

a Special Thanks to  
all the dedicated people  
who run the  
Circus Historical Society  
And create the wonderful  
*Bandwagon!*

James S. Greenburg  
CHS # 4475



## Announcing the **Stuart Thayer Prize**



To encourage the highest quality of research, scholarship and writing about American circus history, the Circus Historical Society announces the Stuart Thayer Prize to be awarded annually to the individual making the most significant contribution to the field of circus history.

This award is named in honor of Stuart L. Thayer (1926-2009), author of numerous books and articles about the antebellum American circus and menagerie. The Stuart Thayer Prize is managed by a three member committee appointed every four years by the newly-elected Circus Historical Society president during his or her initial three months in office.



### **Eligibility**

**Content.** A nominated work must be substantially about American circus history or a very closely related topic.

**Format.** Works may be in any printed form: book, article, pamphlet, booklet, bibliography, compendium of essays, exhibit or sales catalogue, a single essay that is part of a larger work, or an original work contained in digital format on a disk or loaded on a permanent website.

**Posthumous Publication.** Works published posthumously for the first time are eligible for nomination.

**Exclusions.** Exhibits, websites, symposiums, etc., that do not issue a permanent document or are not archived in some permanent format are not eligible for nomination. Fictional works are not eligible. Re-printings and new editions of older works without annotation or other updating that substantially improve the work are not eligible. Virtual and digital library content and activity are not eligible for nomination.

**Release Date.** A work published, issued or released within the calendar year prior to the Prize year is eligible for nomination.

**Nominators.** Any CHS member may nominate one or more works for the Prize. Members may nominate their own works for the Prize.

**Nominations Submission.** All nominations must be submitted using the nomination form. Each nomination must be signed and dated by the nominator.

**Deadline.** All nominations must be submitted no later than February 14, 2012.

Complete details and the nomination form can be downloaded from the CHS website at [www.circushistory.org/ThayerPrize.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/ThayerPrize.htm) or by writing:

**Stuart Thayer Prize**  
Circus Historical Society  
519 N. Union St.  
Appleton, WI 54911



# "CUTTING UP OLD CIRCUS MONEY"

by Harry Barnet

*Part five of this series appeared in the April 30, 1921 issue of The Dearborn Independent. Parts six and seven appeared in the May 14, and May 28, 1921 issues of the same publication. The seventh installment concludes these articles.*

## V. Nomading Olden Trails

In trunks, stored on the top floor of the family home of Governor John F. Robinson at the former winter quarters of his circus in the Little Miami country near Cincinnati, are receipted bills for each expenditure made during the circus seasons, beginning as far back as the late 1850's, and ending a few years ago, when the circus that had been, in succession, the property of his father, himself, and of his son for a hundred years, passed into other hands.

The bills for each year are kept in separate trunks, together with the statistics of the show—the amount of the receipts at each performance; the prices paid for licenses, rent of show lots, pay rolls signed by famous tent showmen and women who drew the money; and even notations as to the character, and the likes and dislikes, of the people who lived in the different parts of the United States visited by the circus during that year.

It's a motley collection of information, but each scrap of paper in it holds a story to the Governor. He knows the how and the why of the majority of these notations.

"We were the first big show to get into Texas," he said one afternoon when we were rummaging through the more aged of the trunks, and he came across a receipted hotel bill, signed by the sheriff of a Texas county.

"That was very early in 1850," he continued, "and we stayed six months. We did a tremendous business. We were the talk of that country for years after that time.

The view from inside King Tut's tomb. Room at Robinson family home in Terrace Park where circus records going back to the late 1850s were stored. Some of this material is now at the Cincinnati Public Library. Photo from article.

"It was pretty soft for us. The rich Mexicans and the ranchers and even the Negroes had more money than they knew what to do with. We charged a dollar admission, and it was cheap country to travel across. There were no licenses. Hay was a dollar a ton, and other food costs in proportion.

"But the hotel keepers tried to gouge us every once in a while. You know, in those days we didn't have a camp on the lot where we fed our people; everybody, including the workingmen, was put up at the little hotels.

"In the mornings, after the show had left the town, Pa used to pay the bills, because he didn't know what they would be until everything belonging to the show had cleared out. This morning, he had some argument with the hotel proprietor about the amount of the bill. What it was about, now, I don't remember.

"We had a carryall that we rode in, my father, mother, younger brother, sister and myself. I rode in front with my father, and the rest of them sat on the back seat. We had a very spirited pair of bay mares, thoroughbreds, and the team stood hitched right in front of the hotel.

"We were sitting there, waiting for Pa to pay the bill and come out so we could start. All of a sudden he came out rearing and tearing, and the landlord behind him. Pa jumped into the carryall, took up the reins, and slapped the horses on the back with them. They gave a jump, and we were off.

## And Away They Went

"Right in front of us was a little ditch, and the front wheels went down in it. As they came out of the ditch the back of the carryall flew up, and the kingbolt—there was no pin in it—came out of the fifth-wheel, letting the whole thing fall down on the ground. The horses kept going, and Pa went down the street hanging on to the reins, plowing up the dust, and everything else in the sand. I went over the dashboard, and my mother, brother and sister over on top of me.





"We all jumped up as quickly as we could, grabbed the body of the carryall, and lifted it up and out of the road. In the meantime, Pa got the team stopped, turned them around, and drove them back. There was nothing broken, and we were not injured. Mother and I lifted the body of the vehicle, pushed the wheels and axle under it, and let it down. We hitched the team again—the whole occurrence didn't take more than a minute—and started down the street as fast as the horses could take us.

"We were about two or three miles out on the prairie, when Pa looked back and saw a cloud of dust. He surmised what it was, and slowed up. Then three fellows caught up with us. One of them was the sheriff. They circled around us, and one fellow demanded of Pa to stop, and another one told him to surrender. Pa paid no attention to them, but kept the team trotting. Every time one of these fellows would reach from his horse and try to catch the reins Pa would tell him not to touch them, and he would jerk the reins out of reach.

"After a while they got tired of this, and began to get braver.

"If you fellows don't get away from here," Pa finally said, "I'll kill the whole gang of you."

"Elizabeth, give me that pistol," he said, turning to mother.

### Off Gallops the Posse

"She had brought a bag of doughnuts with her, and she and my brother and sister were eating them. Pa grabbed the longest doughnut, and brought it down as though he was going to shoot the sheriff. The three fellows turned their horses around, and galloped out of range. Then Pa jumped out of the carryall, and held the doughnut pistol on them for a while; then he motioned for them to come back. When they did, he told them that he'd paid the hotel keeper what he thought was right for what he gave us, and he wouldn't pay any more. But he did want a receipted bill for what he had paid. The sheriff accepted the bill, and this is the bill. Mother never had any appetite for doughnuts after that time.

"I wonder how I ever went through the hardships of the early days with the old wagon circus," the Governor went on, after scrutinizing a bill for supplies purchased in Thomasville, Georgia, long before the war between the states.

"The night before we showed this time in Thomasville, we were going along the road, when a norther struck us full in the face. The horses soon got tired of facing the rain and the sleet, and they turned around in the road—they simply wouldn't face the storm. We were near a schoolhouse, and there was still some fire in the fireplace, so we went in and built it

Location, Parsons Avenue, between Oak and Broad Sts.

OLD JOHN ROBINSON'S



GREAT  
World's Exposition!

TO THE PEOPLE OF OHIO:

THE INCOMING OF THE "CENTENNIAL Year" marks an epoch in my life's history. I shall inaugurate my 55th year as a manager. It has been my good fortune during the period named to make many warm personal friends in your midst, and I revert with pleasure to the many courtesies extended to me in the past. It has been my aim during these many years to advertise only what with certainty I could exhibit, and now, in the evening of my life, it is too late to follow any other than the beaten path I have trod for over the last half century. I cannot resort to any method that would mislead or deceive those who have in the past so liberally sustained me in all of my enterprises.

It is, therefore, with a feeling of pardonable pride that I publicly announce that I will exhibit at

COLUMBUS

TUESDAY, MAY 9, 1876.

An exhibition that is unqualifiedly worthy to be called the

Largest Show in the World!

It will consist of

Menagerie, Museum,

Circus and Aquarium!

Each department so complete that for Mirth, Worth, Superiority, Attraction and Quality, they far surpass all my previous efforts. In addition to

Fifty Cages of Wild Animals

Will be found many rare species only owned by me in America. The Circus is complete in all particulars, the Aquarium the largest traveling, and the Museum of Animate Nature unequalled. A great feature in the Grand Street Display is the FIRST ELEPHANT TEAM EVER DRIVEN TO HARNESS IN AMERICA. Two Mammoth Bands will enliven the entertainment with the most choice Musical Gems. During the performance the Orchestra will produce for the first time in public the GRAND CENTENNIAL MARCH composed expressly for this occasion. Notwithstanding the enormous expense of this GIGANTIC ORGANIZATION, I have fixed the price of admission to the entire show as follows:

TICKETS 50 CTS., CHILDREN 25 CTS.,

And in no instance will I allow an increased charge to my Great World's Exposition. I remain, respectfully,

OLD JOHN ROBINSON.

John Robinson newspaper ad from the *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, May 5, 1876. John Polacsek collection.

up again. The first thing we knew the whole building was afire, and everybody, horses and people, gathered around it while it burned. It was a funny sight, I can tell you.

"A few days later, we had another cold snap, one that froze ice a quarter of an inch thick. I was riding with Pa one morning about daylight, when we caught up with the baggage wagons and the cages. They were stopped, and the men were standing around little fires that they had started. When we got out of the rig, we found that the road led through a swamp where there always was from a few inches to two feet of water—there were many roads of that kind in the South in those days—and this water had frozen until there was probably half a mile of ice through which it was impossible to get the horses to go. They would balk rather than make the attempt.

"Pa didn't delay. He took the horse that was ridden by the man who led the elephant, and grabbing a fence rail, he started to break a road through that half mile of ice. The horse balked after he started, so Pa jumped off, and let it go back to the group around the fires. Then he waded through the swamp, cracking the ice with the rail the whole distance. Then he came back, making an open way for the baggage wagons to get through. He was soaking wet, and nearly frozen, so we stopped one of the baggage wagons, got out his trunk, and helped him to put on dry clothes in that bitter cold. He never suffered from any bad effects, however.

"During that same season we were having a lot of trouble with one of the wagons. It seemed to be always in trouble. It was a four-horse load, and it finally wound up by being pulled by eight horses, but still they were always balking and stalling and in trouble.

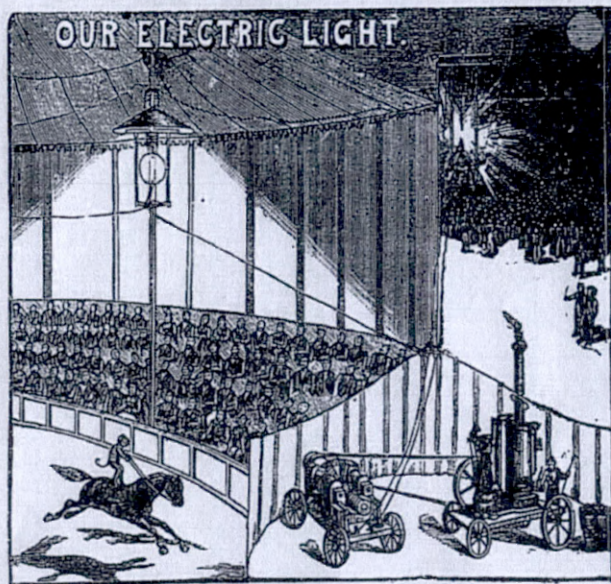
"One day we met a mule drover with a bunch of mules, and Pa bought four of the finest ones there were in the lot. They were matched, about eighteen hands high, and weighed in proportion. They were fresh and young, and when they were hitched to that load it was like pulling a sulky to them.

"Going from Cuthbert, Georgia, to Eufala, Alabama, we had to cross a swamp. The road through it was corduroy—logs laid down, you know. I was very anxious to see that mule team bring the load through the swamp, where the wheels went down to their hubs between the logs, and then they would jump up and down, which made it very trying on the team. So I got in front of them with my buggy where I could see what they were doing. The



COMING IN SPECIAL TRAINS --- 50 CARS!

**JOHN ROBINSON'S GREAT  
WORLD'S EXPOSITION,**  
New Electric Light Show, Animal Conservatory, Aquarium and  
STRICTLY MORAL CIRCUS,  
Will Exhibit at **ANDERSON**, on FRIDAY, OCTOBER 8th, 1880.



**This Magnificently Appointed  
MODEL MONSTER ENTERTAINMENT**

INVITES criticism and challenges comparison. There is nothing half so varied and comprehensive on the road. Everything about it is SPIC-SPAN NEW. It is in no sense one of the old-time canvas shows of the past, but is organized on a SCALE OF IMMENSITY hitherto unparalleled. EVERY ACT and FEATURE A NOVELTY. The entire SERIES OF VAST PAVILIONS Brilliantly Illuminated with the new Brush Electric Light, in many respects preferable to the

**EDISON ELECTRIC LIGHT!**

Requiring a specially constructed steam engine of many horse-power, for the generation of Electricity, and many MILES OF INSULATED WIRE, illuminating all surrounding objects with a soft, mellow, but surpassingly brilliant light, equaling in intensity the noonday sun, a RADIUS OF HALF A LEAGUE. The engine used in connection with this light was constructed especially for this purpose by the Fitchburg Steam Engine Company, of Fitchburg, Mass.

**THE BIGGEST AND BEST  
TROUP OF ARENIC CELEBRITIES**

Ever assembled in the Universe, introducing none but absolute Novelties in the Entertainments of the Ring.

**50 Great Dens and Cages. 100 Star Artists,**  
Male and Female, from the best Equestrian and Gymnic Establishments the world has produced. Curious and Rare LIONS OF THE SEA, Immense SUMATRAN RHINOCEROS, Living HIPPOPOTAMUS, CRESTED STEMMATOPUS, AFRICAN NYLGHAU, RIDING CYNOCEPHALUS BABOON, GIGANTIC NEMMOOK, GREAT SAHARA ELAND, WHITE JAVA PEACOCKS ROYAL YAK, The HARTBEEST, CARIA BARA or Water Hog, LIVING EGYPTIAN CROCODILE, 20 feet long, African and Colorado ANTELOPES, POONAH, SUN and SLOTH BEARS, and an Endless Collection of all the Rare Beasts, Birds and Reptiles known to Natural History.

**EXTENSIVE AND INCOMPARABLE CIRCUS**

**A Herd of MONSTER ELEPLANTS,**

Trained differently from any in existence, and embracing every known Species, from the tiny yearling to the most stupendous male. A Comprehensive College of EDUCATED ANIMALS!

The most complete and exhaustive Academy of Brute Scholars ever established.

**ONE TICKET ADMITS TO EVERYTHING**

Here advertised, the admission being the same and no more than is charged by minor Shows with only one or two tents.

Two Performances Daily. Doors open at 12 M. and 6 P. M.  
Admission, - - - - - 75 Cents.

Robinson ad from *The Anderson Intelligencer* of Anderson Court House, South Carolina, September 30, 1880.

logs of the corduroy were pegged down on each side to prevent them from floating away when the water got high enough to run over the embankment.

**Down Went the Mule**

"I was wearing a very fine overcoat, lined with the finest of furs. The coat had a big heavy cape on it. The collar came high up around my neck, and the coat itself reached to my ankles. I had on a pair of high top boots that came to my knees. All of a sudden, one of the lead mules coming along over these logs went down into a hole between a couple of saplings, and fell. Now there is nothing in the world that will give up so quick as a mule in cold water, and this mule was no exception. His head went under the water.

"I was afraid he would drown, so I jumped out of the buggy and ran to him. The water was running over the top of the road, but I held the mule's head up. He commenced to struggle with me hanging to him, and all of a sudden he gave a little twist, and threw me over this embankment. My heels caught on the log, and I went down into deep water head foremost, big coat, heavy boots, and all. It seemed to me I was under that water for an hour or more—it couldn't have been very many seconds—when one or two of the men ran over and got me out. But I got soaking wet, and after that I had to ride twenty-five miles in an open buggy in the snow and the sleet that started to come down a little while after we got out of the swamp. When I got to the town and tried to get out of the buggy I was frozen fast to it, and they had to chop me loose from the cushions.

"However, one of our greatest annoyances and troubles with the old wagon show," the Governor went on, "were the ferries and the tollgates. I remember one time in Kentucky, there was a country storekeeper at a crossroads, and he stopped me. He wanted to know if I didn't want to make a little money. I told him I did. He said that if I left the road there, and went down the side of the mountain, and around through a valley, then up another road that I wouldn't have to go more than half a mile farther, and could escape a tollgate. That would save me from fifty to a hundred dollars toll.

"I thanked the fellow very much, and started the wagons down this other road. This fellow had a very nice store, with stanchions supporting a wooden awning in front of it. The stanchions were made of six-inch boards put together to make a square column. After all the wagons had gone by I started to leave. Then the storekeeper insinuated that as he thought he had saved me some money, he ought to be remunerated.

"Well, at first, that struck me as funny, but I thought he was about right. So I asked him what he thought he ought to have.

"Oh, probably fifty dollars, or a hundred tickets to the show," he said.

**Shotgun vs. Knife**

"Of course, I couldn't stand for that, and the argument became fast and furious. In the excitement of it he went into his store two or three times, and shifted the position of his shotgun. That was done to intimidate me, I knew. So I took out my knife, and commenced talking fast. I was excited, and so was he, and after awhile I discovered that I had been whittling one of the stanchions until I had it cut about half in two—the four planks were nailed together, you know, in the form of a box. There was a chance for a damage suit, but he was so excited that he didn't notice what I had done. I started to get down off of the porch, and every second I expected to get shot in the back.



Robinson advertisement from the *Omaha* (Nebraska) *Daily Bee* of May 23, 1885.

"I got in my buggy, and when I saw he wasn't going to shoot, I settled with him for ten dollars.

"In 1868 we crossed the Red Sea Swamps. They are in the Mississippi bottoms opposite Memphis. We had traveled all the preceding summer and winter, and that summer late into the fall—about twenty-two months—and never missed a stand. I was ambitious to keep up the record. Such a thing never had happened before in circus history, and I would do almost anything to keep the record unbroken.

"When we started from the Memphis side to drive through the swamps, we found that there had been three or four heavy summer thunder showers through there, and the result was that in a distance of forty miles I don't think there was a mile of dry road. There was anywhere from an inch to three or four feet of mud and water all over that road. We drove from Memphis to Marion, a distance of nine miles, and gave the afternoon show. Then we started to go to Wittsburg, thirty-five miles away, through this swamp. In four or five miles I discovered that the horses were getting fagged very fast in the hot sun and mud. When night came we had made very little progress.

"We stopped at a little log hut where a white man lived with four or five wives—he was a typical Arkansas traveler—and he let us have all the water we wanted at twenty-five cents a bucket. There wasn't a particle of ground in sight—it was all covered with water, yet none of it was fit to drink, as it was muddy swamp water. There were no streams, and the water laid flat, in pools. It wasn't very long before this fellow's well ran dry.

"We laid over there, and got an early start next morning. Now, this man was supposed to be very sick with the break-bone fever. Yet, after we left he got on his mule and followed us some ten or fifteen miles, because he said he had forgotten to count two buckets of water, which amounted to fifty cents. When he caught up with us we got out our pencils and sharpened them, and began to figure with him. We showed him that he had been overpaid, and he didn't get the fifty cents, after all that hot ride, with the dango fever worrying him.

"He tried to collect the money at a place where we were crossing a slough. A farmer there had heard that the circus was coming his way, and he built a log bridge for our benefit. He was laying there for us with a lot of his good friends to help him for a couple of days before we got there. Then he wanted to collect toll. My recollection is that his charges were about five dollars for a four-horse wagon, and a dollar for each foot passenger. Anyhow, his bill was something like a couple of hundred dollars.

"The bridge was nothing but a lot of logs laid on some sleepers. They were not even hewed down level, and the horses and wagons slipped and slid everywhere—some of them slid pretty nearly off into the slough—and it would have been a great deal better for us if he had let us go through in our own way. But he didn't get more than ten per cent of what he asked for. He was daffy on perpetual motion, and some of my men got in conversation with him on the subject, and got him so rattled that he settled for twenty dollars.

#### Loses Day on Engagements

"When the second night came we still were some four or

# The Largest Show on Earth

**Council Bluffs,**  
**SATURDAY,**  
**MAY 30**

**OMAHA,**  
**MONDAY,**  
**JUNE 1st.**

**OLD JOHN ROBINSON,**



**Circus,**  
**Museum,**

**10 Combined,**  
**10 Shows,**

**10 Menagerie**  
**10 Aquarium.**

**Will EXhibit at Council Bluffs, Saturday, May 30th.**

**Will Exhibit at Omaha, Monday, June 1st.**

**No Exaggeration Advertisement.**

**No Gross Misrepresentations.**

**A Show that Depends upon Performances**  
**Not upon Promises.**

## AN UNAQUALED CIRCUS

**An Unrivalled Menagerie.**

The grand gorgeous street display, is infinitely greater than any of the kind ever witnessed in this city.

John Robinson will donate the public school fund One Thousand Dollars if his show is not far superior, and an extra one thousand dollars if his street display is not pronounced larger, better and grander than any other show here this season.

For details of this great show see programmes, pictorial and descriptive bills.

Two performances at 2 and 7:30 p m

The grand street display will take place at 8 a m





Cages with gabled roofs, called cottage cages, were a distinctive feature of Robinson parades in the early 1900s. Shown here are cage #26 on left, and #75 on right. Pfening Archives.

five miles away, and that is the day I should have been in Wittsburg, so my record was broken. I sent one of my men with my horse and buggy into Wittsburg to get some provisions and feed sent out for the people and horses, as they had been all day without anything to eat. When he got near to Wittsburg he found the St. Francis River was between him and the town, and it was dark, no one around, and the river was rather narrow. He didn't know there was a ferry there. In fact, he didn't know the geography of the country, not even that there was such a river as the St. Francis. He supposed it was a creek, so he drove the horse into it. The first thing he knew the horse was swimming, and the buggy was floating. That horse swam probably a hundred yards, and he landed on the other side without an accident, which I consider a remarkable performance. Not a thing was lost out of the buggy.

"Well, he got the feed and stuff back to us, and we got a pretty early start the next morning. By that time the roads had dried up pretty well, but still I was a day behind my dates. I should have been at Forest City, and there I was at Wittsburg, twenty-five miles away. I took a piece of side canvas, and made a corral from tree to tree across the road. The people who came there the day before to see the show remained overnight to wait for us, and I charged them a dollar apiece to get inside of the corral. As the cages came over the ferry they were driven right into the inclosure. We took the doors off the cages, cleaned them, fed the animals, and by that time another load would be over. While we were cleaning the cages the people in the inclosure looked at the animals, and that was all the performance there was. When the animals were fed, we put up the doors, and the cage drove out the other side, and on to Forest City. On my books I have the day's business at Wittsburg, but I didn't do the business there on the day it should have been done. I was a day behind. But I got about three hundred dollars there, so that I feel that I didn't lose the record. I have something to show for the stand.

"Fortunately, at Wittsburg we got on the hills and bluffs. I managed to get the show to Forest City about sundown, and put up the tents. We had a tremendous night house. The next day was Sunday, and I caught up with my

dates, and got around a very serious problem.

"The drive to the next stand was a short one—not over twelve miles—and as the day was Sunday I didn't leave Forest City until after dinner. I calculated to get in the next town before dark, and I thought that would give the horses a good night's rest. We left, and in a short distance got into a kind of a low, flat country, not exactly swamps. In a very short time I discovered that our horses were being attacked by buffalo gnats and flies—horseflies, larger than any I ever had seen, the kind that have been known to kill a horse in half an hour by sucking the blood right out of him.

"Well, they were so thick on my horses, and they came so suddenly and so many of them, that the horses fairly were dripping blood. I had the men get out of the wagons and cut bushes and stick them into the buckles and loops of the harness, and then the men walked alongside the horses and whipped them with brushes to keep the flies away. In that way we managed to get through the place, which was probably a mile long. If I had put off taking these precautions a very few minutes I probably would have had some of my horses killed."

## VI. Snakes and Small Boys

"Governor, when did you learn to ride a horse in a circus ring?" was the question I asked John F. Robinson at the beginning of this interview. We were seated on the ring bank in the training barn at the winter quarters of his circus in the Little Miami country, near Cincinnati. I turned loose the query with the hope that he would dip into his memory, and pull out of it something that would give me an idea of what youngsters who traveled with the pioneer wagon shows did as a matter of every day routine and amusement. No one seems to have had much to say on that subject.

And I queried the right man. No one is better able to answer the questions I had in mind.

"When I was so little that I couldn't sit on a pony," the Governor replied to the question I asked, "and to keep me on Pa had to tie my legs to the surcingle and the stirrups, I rode races in the ring.

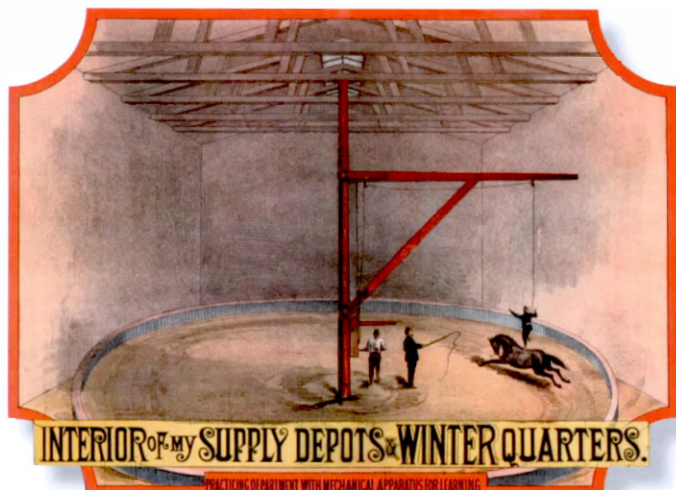
"In those days, you know," he went on, "we only had one ring. There was no hippodrome track between it and the seats, like we have in these days. The tent was so small that the seats came almost to the ring bank. The performances always were brought to a close with races. Necessarily they were run in the ring. Boys on ponies

The Robinson show produced the spec King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba on and off from 1891 through 1906. This gigantic wagon was used to transport the extensive scenery used in the production. Cincinnati Historical Society collection.





could run them better there than men could do it on horses, so these races always were between boys on ponies. My cousin rode one of the races with me. He was only a few months older than I was, but in his mind and his size he was a good deal older, and I thought he was older. One day in Augusta, Georgia, when we were sitting in the dressing room waiting our turn to go in, he was showing me how to hold my reins. He would whip my pony, and I would jerk him, and seesaw him, and I got my pony worked up until he was mighty restless.



Section of Adam Forepaugh poster from early 1880s showing a mechanical device similar to the one on which Robinson learned to ride. Ringling Art Museum, Tibbals Digital collection.

"At last, he couldn't stand the punishment any longer and he went out under the side canvas. Of course, I hit the side canvas and the guy ropes, and that threw me back on to the pony. At the same time it broke my hold, and I fell around under the pony. You can tell how small I was. This was a small pony, and I was hanging down underneath him the whole length of the stirrups, and my whole body and legs, but my head didn't touch the ground. I had long, curly hair, and when this pony ran down the street like old fury, it looked as though every time his front feet came up they were knocking me on the head—and, in fact, they did it two or three times.

"In those days, towns in the South used surface drainage; they had a big ditch in the middle of the streets, and three or four smaller ones on the side of the main ditch.

"Well, the pony ran about a mile that way, and everybody in the circus was after us, and everybody in the streets was chasing us, but at the same time they couldn't see us until the pony got by the stores and one thing and another, and the ditches made chasing us a hard job. At last, an old darkey ran his dray across one of these streets, and jumped across, the ditch. When he got on the other side he caught the pony. So after it was all over there was nothing the matter, only a big sensation; everybody thought I was killed, and I wasn't even scared. The reason I remember it so well was because I had sore eyes then, and Pa used to pour molasses into them every day to cure them.

"I was only a little older when Pa started to teach me to ride on old Billy, a mare that we had with the show. And he had to jolly me along a good deal to get me to learn to ride. While I was ambitious, yet I was such a tiny boy that I didn't realize what I was doing.

"But while I did excel any of them in riding and tumbling dur-

ing my boyhood, I never was much of an athlete. I never had any ambitions to go into the air—I always was afraid of tumbling too far. While at the time I had made up my mind that I wanted to do something else with the show, I knew for the time being I was in for riding and tumbling, and I thought I would go as far as I could.

"But getting up on a horse and turning somersaults was a hard proposition for me, though I had the crude appliances to keep me from getting hurt. We had a mechanic—a pole attached to the center pole at an angle, and a rope running down from its end. I tied the rope to my belt, and if I fell I was left dangling in the air until Billy came around again under me. But somehow or other, I didn't have sand enough to flop over at the start, and Pa jollied me along every way he could. He tickled me a lot, too, with the lunge whip, but still I couldn't get over.

"If you will do the somersault once," he said one day, "you will break the ice, and we'll quit for the day."

"He knew that if I did it once," the Governor said after he had paused to chuckle, "there would be no more trouble. Finally, he said he would give me a couple of ponies, and harness and a buggy if I would turn a somersault. I accepted them, and then I knew I'd have to turn that somersault. I got up and did it, and it wasn't very long before I could do a somersault on a horse as well as I could roll over on the ground.

"After I got the ponies, it wasn't very long until I was riding the two of them in the ring. I wore a monkey suit with a monkey mask that had eyes I could roll and wink with a string. In the South, the Negroes thought I was a real monkey, you know, and I always finished that act by jumping off the ponies, and running up into the seats among them. That frightened the Negroes almost into a panic, and they scattered all over the canvas to get away from me. Then I dropped down between the seats, and walked along the side canvas to the dressing room.

"Well, one night when I dropped through the seats I landed right on a dirty, rusty rake, lying there with the prongs up. One of the prongs ran through my foot. It hurt me so that I couldn't do anything for a few seconds. Then I was too stubborn to ask anybody to help me. With the long handle to the rake in my road, I couldn't get the prong out of my foot. Finally, I stood up, put my other foot on the rake handle, and gradually worked that prong out of my foot. It took quite a lot of exertion to do it, too.

"I went to the dressing room, and I don't remember whether my foot bled or not. Anyway, I dressed and went, to the hotel with my mother. It was wintertime, cold and chilly, but I never said a word. Next day the instep was swollen, and as sore as a boil. There had been nothing done to the wound, you know. Within a day or two there was a raised place on my foot as big as your fist, and I was sick and chilled all the time. One day I tried to put on my tights, but my foot was so swollen by that time that I couldn't get my foot through at all.

"The thing hurt me so that the tears were running down my face. One of the performers asked me what I was crying about, and I showed him my foot. I guess it was then about a week after the accident happened, and you can imagine what kind of a foot I had. It never had had any attention. The performer told my mother about it, and she came to the dressing room. I showed her my foot and she sent for Pa. He had me taken to the hotel. I hadn't rested since the thing happened, either awake or asleep, it hurt me so. I was out in the cold every day, walking on this foot, putting on tights and old canvas pumps, my feet cold as ice most of the time, and it was time for something to happen.

"They laid me on a couch in the hotel in front of the fireplace, with my foot on a pillow. I lay on my back while the doctor lanced



it. There was no such thing then as hypodermic syringes, and morphine was unknown. The only thing we ever had heard of was chloroform, and we were afraid of it. When he drew his knife across the raised place, the matter and pus came out like a fountain, an inch or two inches high. I was so relieved that I dropped to sleep before the doctor had wiped his knife. Then he dressed the wound, and next day I was back in the ring. Nowadays, if that would happen to anybody he would have lockjaw, and be dead in a day or two. So you can see, in old days, kids around the circus didn't have a very easy life.

"We always looked like a county fair, moving from place to place," the Governor continued without the necessity of questioning. "There were a lot of fellows who didn't belong to us following the show. They were traders of all kinds, who worked among the crowds that were attracted to the show.

"There were some pretty decent fellows among them. One of them was a buggy trader. We weren't very old then—my brother and my cousins—and for some reason mother stayed in Augusta, Georgia, for a while. Pa didn't have much time to look after us, and we did pretty nearly as we pleased.

"It was mighty cold weather, and this trader never had less than six buggies tied one behind another as he went from town to town. We used to fill a buggy apiece with fodder and straw at night, hide in the bottom of it, and go to sleep while he drove from town to town. Otherwise we would have to sit on the seats of the baggage wagons all night long.

"One morning we woke up about six o'clock, and looked out from our nests. The trader had stopped, and was talking to a planter. We went to sleep again, and it was nine or ten o'clock when we woke up. We were in the same place. The planter had invited the trader to stay there for a few days while he helped him to sell a few buggies.

"Well, it was eight or ten miles to the town where we were to show that day, and there was nothing to do but to walk that distance. We weren't giving parades in those days, so we didn't have to be there before the matinee. We got into the town about noon. I grabbed my tights, and the other boys did the same thing, and we started out to find a mammy to wash them for us. We found one, but she only had half an hour to do it, and get them ironed. Well, she couldn't do it all, so I got her to wash my tights, and wring them out. I took them to the dressing room wringing wet.

"It was an awful cold, blustery day. I don't think any of us had washed our hands and faces for a week—it was too cold to do it. We had been standing over the fat pine knot fires on the lot until we were as black as darkies. As I was putting on these tights just before the performance, the wind was blowing as cold as could be through

the dressing tent and I was shivering. Every time I took hold of the tights to pull them on my hands were so dirty that when I let loose of them there was the whole print of my hand on the legs of them. By the time I got them on they not only were stretched five times too big for me, but they were blacker than they were before I had them washed.

"Pa came in just as I finished putting on the tights. He saw me standing there shivering, and how dirty I was. The first thing I knew he grabbed me by the back of the neck, stripped me, and stood me head first in a bucket of cold water. Then he commenced to scrub me with a blacking brush and a bar of that old-fashioned resin soap. He nearly scrubbed my skin off—that resin soap was awful stuff.

"The other boys stood around, laughing and giggling at me. They thought it was a pretty good joke. When Pa got through with me

he shoved me away. The next instant he had one of my cousins, who was a little bit older, standing on his head in a water bucket. He got the same dose. Then it was my turn to giggle and laugh. By this time the older boys saw what was coming, and they hustled around, and got buckets and tubs and pails and soap, and when Pa got through with my cousin, and looked around to get the next boy in line, there they were, all sitting in a row as naked as the day they were born, grinning at him, and as clean as they could be. Then Pa sat down in his old leather-seated chair and laughed.



The Robinson elephants in parade about 1905. Note man playing flageolet on lead elephant. Pfening Archives.

"But that method of getting from town to town without riding on the baggage wagons gave me an unreasonable fear of snakes," the Governor said, "and of the people who handle them. That may seem to be a queer statement from a man who has owned thousands and thousands of reptiles, from eighteen and twenty-foot snakes to little fellows that 'Hiki' used to eat in the side show at every performance.

"The first time we went into Texas and Indian Nation in the early '50s, there were five or six of us boys with the show. Before we left Texas Pa bought us some mustang ponies to ride from town to town. And after the show was over at night we would ride fifteen or twenty miles, then lie down on the prairie and sleep until sunrise. Then we would get up, and ride the rest of the way to the next town. Sometimes it would take hours for the baggage wagons to make that distance. After a while, one boy would ride his pony, and lead another fellow's pony one night, and change about the next night. Then we could get in the baggage wagons and sleep all night long. I had a very wild pony, as black as the ace of spades. One night when my cousin started to lead my pony, he carelessly tied the halter to his wrist. He wasn't very far from town when he dropped to sleep, and slid off his pony.

"That scared my pony and he started off on a run, dragging my



cousin probably a mile or more over what was named a 'hog wallow prairie,' which was nothing more than bumps and hollows, like the hogs had been there rooting and hunting around. By the time he got the pony stopped my cousin had no clothes left on him, except the collar of his shirt, and not a particle of skin from his knees to his head.

"This happened where there was no water, and when his father found him, and commenced to look around for something to wash him in, he couldn't think of anything else but whether anybody around the show had any liquor. Almost every man on the wagons carried a bottle of whisky, and they poured it all into one bucket. It made about a bucketful, and my cousin was washed in that. You can imagine how much misery that young fellow went through. It took him about three or four weeks to get the sores pretty well healed up. And that put a stop to us trading off for the chance of sleeping in the wagons. Every fellow had to ride his own pony, and even that ended in a short time. Of course, the custom had to go out in a spectacular fashion. I always wound things up that way; it was the circus coming out of me, I guess.

"One night shortly after that, we were riding to Waco. We were within three or four miles of the town before daylight when we thought we would take a nap. We carried horsehair lariats and little stakes that we stuck in the ground to picket our ponies while we slept. We also carried Mexican blankets that we put under the saddles to ease our ponies' backs. That gave us a blanket apiece if we wanted them when it rained.

"This night I took the blanket off my pony, folded it up nicely, and laid it on the grass; put my pony out with the lariat, and lay down to sleep. About sun-up I woke up when the rest of the boys did, picked up my blanket, and started to fold it, when I looked down at my feet. There lay two of the biggest bull snakes I ever saw. I had been lying on them all night, and I didn't know whether

they crawled there while I was asleep, or whether I laid the blanket down on them before I went to sleep.

"When I saw the snakes I was paralyzed. For a minute I stood still, and then I commenced to yell and jump around like I was crazy. There was nothing there to kill the snakes with, and they crawled away. That settled the pony riding for good. And to this day, as old as I am, I shiver every time I think of those snakes, and as long as I ran the show I never did go close to any of the snake charmers; nor did I ever look at any of the thousands of snakes that I've owned.

"And a curious thing, too, about being scared by snakes, I got another terrible snake scare in Texas years after that time. The whole show got it, too. I had a snake man by the name of Millwood with the show who had been with me for years. I hired him at Cairo, Illinois. He had a cage built like a room, and he claimed to have one thousand reptiles in it, of every variety on the American continent. Well, he had this cage on the street in Cairo one year when we showed there, and it was such an attraction that I heard about it, and sent my brother Gil down to look it over. When he came back and reported to me what it was, I hired the man. He conducted what we call the 'uptown show,' an attraction that catches the crowds before parade on the street.

"Millwood would sit among the snakes, fondling them, and appeared to be infatuated with them. There was nothing he loved so well as a snake, and he never was happy without a bunch of them about him. He carried snakes in every pocket, and they always were of the deadly kind. And he never took the bother to remove their poison bags. But I never let him come near me; I told him I'd kill him if he didn't keep as far away from me as he could when he saw me coming.

"One season, when we were returning from San Francisco to Florida, whenever the circus trains stopped in Texas for water, or to pass other trains, everybody jumped off and commenced to hunt snake holes.

"'Hey, Millwood, here's another snake hole,' whoever found one

So-called Europe tableau wagon with clowns atop in Robinson parade in Union City, Pennsylvania, 1902 or 1904. Pfening Archives.







The Robinson show had one of the few advance cars with carvings on the sides. This image was taken while the bill crew was in Iowa City, Iowa to bill the engagement scheduled for June 20, 1910. Pfening Archives.

would yell.

"Then Millwood would come running, and shove his hand down into the hole and pull out the snake. By that time, somebody else would find a snake hole, and Millwood pulled out snakes, until the train started. He put the snakes in a carpet bag.

"One Sunday afternoon he had the bag filled with snakes when the train pulled out. When he got on the sleeper he hung the bag on a hook. The berths were stationary, and the boys were lying in them, smoking and talking and singing, when some fellow happened to look up. The carpet bag was open, and snakes were falling out of it as fast as they could.

"Well, my private car was next to this car, and I heard the yelling. I thought something awful had happened, and ran to the door. Just as I got there the car door was pouring out men like they were rats scampering from a burning building. They climbed on the roof, and some of them jumped off while the train was running twenty miles an hour.

"We finally got the train stopped, and sent Millwood into the car to get his snakes. He put them in his carpet bag, but he couldn't tell whether he had all of them, because he hadn't counted them. The only way we got the thing settled was to sidetrack the car; tear everything out of it, and thoroughly search it. And I had the same thing done to my car, but they found no snakes in it. But for weeks I never entered that car, and I never went to bed, but what I cringed all over, thinking of the snakes Millwood had turned loose by his carelessness, and of the morning I saw the two bull snakes on the prairie just outside of Waco.

"Millwood, however, died a horrible death a few years after that time in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Across the street from his uptown show a saloon keeper had in a box the biggest rattlesnake that had been captured in that vicinity. Millwood went in to see it, ran his hand down into the box, and pulled the snake out. He finally bought it for a dollar.

"When he got a little leisure time he brought the snake out, and began caressing it; rubbing his hand over its head, and holding it to his bosom. Then he bent over to kiss the snake, and it bit him.

"The liquor he usually drank to counteract the poison did not avail, and he died in the most intense agony."

## VII. The Governor Himself

NOTE—It so happens that Governor John F. Robinson's last activity was the relating of the stories which end with this, his reminiscences of the pioneering circus life of America. The concluding story by Mr. Barnet was in type when word was received that the old circus man had died at his winter home in Miami, Florida

A very dear old lady, who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, has written a letter to me. "You can't imagine how much I enjoy your Governor Robinson stories," she states in that letter.

"Wasn't he 'some boy'?" she unexpectedly went on to say in slang. "Many, many years ago, we lived near Seventh and College streets, in Cincinnati, and I knew him and his family. The home was on the corner, and the animals were quartered during the winter in a building on College street, right back of the home. That place al-

ways seemed like fairyland to me—the pretty wagons, and the wild animals, and especially the appeal that circus things have to wondering small children.

"Then, sixty-six years ago, I went to school in Hyde Park, not a great way from where the Robinsons later established their winter quarters in the Little Miami River country that you speak of. I think it was a good choice, for that is beautiful country. We have many recollections of its beauties.

"But before you quit writing about him," she concluded, "won't you please tell us something about the kind of man the Governor is?"

And from St. Louis recently came an appreciative letter from another very dear old lady. She, also, is deeply interested in the stories that so far have appeared in *The Dearborn Independent*, and she asked me to write a character sketch of the Governor.

Well, this is the answer to these two letters, and in making this answer I believe that the best plan to follow is to set down here some things about the Governor as I have observed them, and a great many other things about his ambitions and ways of thinking in the language in which they were told to me by the man himself.

In many ways, the Governor is a contradiction. That is, he is not the sort of man you may think him to be, if you've pictured him to be anything like the impersonations of circus owners that you've seen on the stage, and in motion pictures. Neither is there anything about him that is suggestive of the cartoons you may have seen of circus proprietors. Governor Robinson is precisely like any other successful businessman, plus a few notions and quirks that are the outgrowth of the things that he has seen and done.

For you must remember that he was not always a master circus mind. At one time he was a human baby, who opened his eyes nearly eighty years ago upon a world that to him was made up of a collection of scraggly wagons; wild beasts encaged in small dens painted precisely alike (for in those days, the Governor says, each show adopted one color for its wagons, and no other show used the same tint); and a troupe of what we might name as itinerant entertainers that made up his father's circus. And that environment surrounded him during his boyhood, and through manhood, until he spent seventy years in it as a circus performer and owner. Of course, since the 1870s it was a very much enlarged and embellished aggregation. The Governor then owned it, and for fifty years he "toted" it over and about the country. Then he passed it on to his son, and it was finally sold to strangers, who took the name and good will of the aggregation along with its wagons and paraphernalia. Three generations of the same family owned the same show; the Governor was the connecting link, between the first and the third, so that he is bound to be somewhat eccentric.

Physically, the Governor is a man of medium height, heavy set, and bald.



"I've got no hair on my head," he said one day, "because a consumptive old white bear died one Sunday when we boys with the show had a lot of time on our hands to get into mischief."

"We were crossing Lookout Mountain one Sunday morning on our way to Trenton, Georgia," the Governor continued. "I was a very small boy. In the menagerie we had an old white bear that had been declining for a long time. Just when we reached the top of the mountain the bear died. Now, we boys with the show had always heard that bear's oil made the best hair oil, and as a white bear cost so much more money than an ordinary bear, we thought that its grease ought to be just that much better than the oil of any other bear. If he had been a common bear we would have paid no attention to him."

"So we skinned him, and got all of the marrow out of his bones, and boiled it with the little fat that he had left on him. I guess we got a little vial of oil for all our trouble. And I remember that we hunted around and got a lot of wintergreen, and perfumed the oil with it."

"Well, we used that oil, and shortly afterward the hair came off my head. I have always thought that the white bear's grease did it, and that there was a curse on it, or something like that. You know, there always was a lot of superstition in me, and I've got a good deal of it left."

"Now, I'm an old man, and so far I've been through the world in a way that I believe no other man ever went through it," he went on without a pause. "But I've never done a good many of the things that most people think a circus owner naturally does, and I've done a good many things that most people think he never naturally does."

"For instance, I never saw a game of faro bank. No man ever saw me in a gambling house. I never gambled for anything more than a cigar. And I never have seen a professional game of baseball, nor have I attended more than two or three horse races. And I never drank liquors, except a little wine when I was a young fellow, although liquors always were before me. Everybody with the show carried whisky, and I was always welcome to a drink of it. Pa often told me that I could take a drink whenever I wanted it. But I never did it. I saw too much of the effects of liquor drinking. Liquor was no new thing to me; and it wasn't forbidden to us boys with the show. So I had no curiosity about it. But if Pa had refused it to me, and had aroused my curiosity that way about it, I suppose I would have drunk it, because I would have thought it the manly thing to do."

"And we were very strict about town people drinking, or bringing intoxicants to sell on the lot. However, they did it whenever they got the chance to do it. And that practice was one of the things that we had to contend with in the old days—men would open regular saloons on the show lot, or near to it, on show days. It caused

us a lot of trouble, because too many men got drunk, and started 'hey rubes.' Finally, I issued an order that no liquors could be sold on the lot by anyone; and when men started to sell on the streets or any place very close to the lot, except in saloons, I always put a stop to the traffic by sending some of my best fighters there to clean out these places."

"So you can imagine my surprise one day, just after the Civil War, when a man drove a two-horse wagon on the lot in a small Indiana town. He had at least half a dozen barrels—not kegs, but barrels—of beer in the wagon, and he proposed to sell it to the crowds waiting for the big show to open. Well, I saw a whole tent full of trouble if these people drank that beer. They would get drunk, and start a dozen fights that we would have to put a stop to, and maybe somebody would be hurt or killed."

"I went up to this man, and told him that he couldn't sell that beer on my show lot."



Traffic ground to a halt when the Robinson show paraded in Urbana, Ohio on June 18, 1911. Among those watching the march that day was seven year old Richard Conover who became the leading historian of the American circus until his death in 1971. Pfening Archives.

"Who says I can't?" he replied. "I got a permit from the owner of this here show grounds to sell beer here, and whisky, too, if I want to, and a state and a town license. I don't reckon I need anything else to sell it."

"He showed me the permits. I was helpless then, but from that day on I had a clause in my contracts for show lots giving me the privilege of ousting every liquor vender who tried to open a shop on my lot."

"Then it was up to me to get rid of this fellow in some other way. One of my men said he would do the job. He went up the street, and got a big vial of croton oil. Then he got some fellow who was in the confidence of this beer seller to talk to him. Finally, this beer man asked the town fellow to watch the beer while he unhitched and unharnessed his horses, and tied them to a wagon wheel. While he was doing that my man went to each barrel, and put enough croton



oil in it to give character to the beer.

"When the beer man came back he invited everybody to have a drink with him as a starter for his business. He was a big, jovial sort of fellow anyhow, and a lot of these people did drink with him. A lot of my men went up, but they took the beer and only pretended to drink it. Of course, nobody else knew about the trick, and the country people were ignorant of what had taken place. Well, there was no more beer sold out of that wagon that day."

Despite the fact that Governor Robinson occupied a place in the amusement world that no other man yet has filled, he is without doubt a disappointed man. He would much rather have been an army man than the greatest of circus executives. This ambition has led him to accumulate, and thoroughly to study for many years all the books he could buy that tell the story from cause to effect of each war in which the United States has been engaged, even to insignificant Indian wars. I seriously doubt whether there are many private libraries in the United States that contain such a collection of war books.

This love for the military cropped out in every interview that I've had with him.

"When I joined the navy I was assigned to the command of Admiral Porter," he began one afternoon, "as an ensign. Well, I never had known discipline, and I innocently got myself into a lot of scrapes when I felt awfully cheap. But the cheapest I ever felt while I was in the navy didn't have anything to do with discipline. I was mistaken for a Jew—either that or maliciously taken for one.

"Along in the winter of 1863, we were trying to get in the rear of Vicksburg, and one night we tied our gunboat in front of the plantation of Governor Sharkey, I believe his name was. He had hundreds of bales of cotton piled up a mile or two back from the landing. Next morning we captured several ox and mule teams, and plantation wagons, and went out to get a bunch of this cotton. I had charge of the train of wagons.

"There were several young daughters at the big house, and some other young ladies also there. They were out on the porch as we went by, and a young officer from our boat was there talking to them. They were very pretty and nice young ladies and, of course, I was inclined to be a little on the flirt, or the mash, or whatever you want to call it. As we went by the house I kissed my hand to them.

"Who is that young man?" one of these girls asked the officer.

"Why, that is Mr. Robinson, from Cincinnati," he replied.

"Well, I declah," she said, "he is the first Jew I evah saw in the service."

"Well, that took all of the conceit out of me, to be mistaken for a Jew. I had little side whiskers then, and a goatee, and a small mustache, and I shaved them off as soon as I got to the boat."

One of the peculiarities of Governor John F. Robinson is the fact that he treasures small memories. One of the pleasantest of all of them is the fact that he once was kissed by a President of the United States.

"I guess I am the only circus fellow in the United States that a President kissed," he went on to say, after pausing to light his cigar. "And it impressed itself so thoroughly on my mind that I can remember it as though it happened but yesterday.

"Zachary Taylor was on his way through Pennsylvania to Washington for his inauguration. There were no railroads in that section of the country, and the President-elect was traveling by carriage. He passed through York, Pennsylvania, the day we were showing there, and stopped for dinner at the same hotel where we stopped. Of course, the whole population wanted to see him, and he went out on the front porch of the hotel to make a speech.

"In getting out on the porch he had to go through the room oc-

cupied by my father and mother and myself, and in passing through I suppose I attracted his attention by getting in his road. I wasn't very old, and had long, golden, curly hair, and he remarked what a handsome boy I was. Old-manlike, he ended by picking me up and kissing me. I can see that man now, picking me up. And I can see him riding down the street. I had watched him come into town. He came in a sort of a parade, accompanied by prominent citizens, a band, and the county militia, and went down the whole length of the street. Then he turned and came back to the hotel. When President Taylor left town I watched him until he got out of sight around a bend in the road. There was quite a cortege of carriages filled with prominent and eminent men of the country in the President's party.

"But speaking of Presidents," the Governor continued, "I've never smoked a cigar without a holder since General Grant's last illness. You know, the General was a heavy smoker, and I believe that's what killed him. If he had used a holder I believe he would have lived much longer."

The Governor paused to rummage through his humidor to get a cigar that exactly suited him. And that was a job requiring some minutes, for he was a bit cranky that day. It is a safe bet that the Governor has burned more cigars than any ninety-nine men out of a hundred. At the mention of his name, the first impression that comes before the eyes of anyone who knows him is his mannerism of crooking his elbow, and holding his cigar in his hand before him at about mid-way the distance between his lower and upper vest pockets. These cigars are always mounted in a holder, with a rubber band twisted about the mouthpiece, because the Governor's teeth will not grip a cigar holder nowadays. I have never seen him without his cigar, except at meals.

"Now, I've always been a heavy smoker," he continued after he found a cigar to his liking, and had it well alight, "and when General Grant died, I thought I'd better begin to take care of myself, or I might go the same way. So I commenced using holders, and I've used all sorts of them, from some that cost me a dime, to others that cost me \$350.

"One season, when I came home from the show, I wasn't feeling very well, and I used to take a buggy ride every day. In going through the village of Terrace Park, near my winter quarters, I saw one of the old settlers working on a wall. I stopped to talk to him, and found out that he was preparing to build a church. I suggested to my wife—she and my daughter were religiously inclined, and so am I—that as I had been through all kinds of experiences I might as well go into the church business, and help build that church. She thought it would be very nice, so I went over to the old gentleman, and told him that I was taking an interest in his church, and would like to help him; that I had about 3,000 or 4,000 feet of redwood lumber, joist and dimension stuff, that I had brought home from my last campaign into California to put into my own residence. Also, I told him that this was rare wood, and that he could have it if it would be of any use to him. I gave him the use of an old horse and dray that we had at winter quarters, and I also gave him \$25 in cash to pay a laborer to drive the cart. That settled matters for a while.

"This old fellow was very hard of hearing. He used an ear trumpet. One night he came over to my home at winter quarters, all smiles. He was overjoyed, he said, to see me looking so well, and then he struck me for \$600 for the church. Well, I couldn't see \$600 then for the church, and as politely as I knew how to do it I refused. The more I refused the more determined he was to get the money, so it got to be right annoying, and a little painful. After a while I commenced to use some cuss words, and he got insulted. He went away after giving me to understand that the church would have a roof whether I put it on or not.



Throughout his life, Governor Robinson has been a retiring man. He spent his life building up the circus, and in doing things that he thought would please his family. One Christmas his daughter and some of her school chums came home to spend the holidays. The family carriage met them at the railroad station in Cincinnati, on orders from the Governor, although the winter quarters is a flag stop for trains at the wagon road crossing that is at the foot of the bluff on which the family home is built. About a mile from the family home, on the road from Cincinnati, the pike hugs the foot of an enormous hill. As it nears the Robinson home the pike plunges into a small forest; approaches the entrance to the home through a deep cut, and leads in a winding fashion to the front portico.

As the carriage neared the winter quarters, about a mile from the home, a brass band of fifty men stepped before it in the road. Of course, the carriage was stopped and the band played a joyful bit of music. At the first note, men stationed 20 feet apart along both sides of the road, the lines extending to the portico, lighted great flares, and held them aloft. Each man was arrayed in a spangled costume of the circus. Then the band lined up in parade formation, and played march after march as it led the Governor's daughter and her friends, riding in state, through the lane of flaming torches to the door of the Governor's home. The house was a blaze of glory—such a blaze as only the Governor's circus sense could devise.

But the most striking thing about the winter quarters is the children's playhouse, that overlooks one of the valleys of the Little Miami River country. The house is a two-story affair, with a front porch. Inside it is finished with as much care as a large dwelling. The Governor erected it for his children, and the structure really is rioted among all circus men as being a most unusual manifestation



After the ball is over, Robinson equipment stored at Terrace Park winter quarters outside Cincinnati prior to its being transferred to Peru, Indiana after the show was purchased by Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers. Cincinnati Historical Society collection.

of a father's love.

I'm sorry that I cannot go further with my answer to the dear old lady who lives in Birmingham, and to the dear old lady who lives in St. Louis, but editorial patience, and the limitations of space, compel a halt right here and now. And at any time that is the penalty that an interviewer of Governor Robinson pays for the privilege. **BW**

## Merry Christmas and a



## Happy New Year.

Bob Cline – CHS Secretary / Treasurer



Merry Christmas & Happy New Year  
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# THE DONALDSON LITHOGRAPHING COMPANY

By Chris Berry

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cincinnati was the undisputed center for show printing in America. The bustling city on the banks of the Ohio River was home to the big printing houses of Strobridge, Enquirer, Russell-Morgan and Donaldson. For decades the owners of circuses and theatrical shows presented their ideas to the skilled artists in Cincinnati, and in a matter of weeks spectacular images were created, printed by the thousands and shipped by rail to wherever an advance team of bill-posters was standing by to plaster the bold images to the sides of barns and buildings and hang them in the windows of ten-thousand shops from coast to coast. This is the story of a family firm that played a key role in developing that tradition, and whose work still inspires some 70 years after the final poster rolled off of its presses. This is the story of the Donaldson Lithographing Company.

The summer of 1863 was a defining time for the nation and for Cincinnati. With the Union victories in both Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Americans saw the tide turning in the Civil War and Cincinnati played a key role. Because of its location across the river from the slave state of Kentucky and its position as a major supply and transportation hub, Cincinnati was buzzing with activity. It was during the wartime boom that William M. Donaldson and his partner Henry Elmes started their lithography company, Donaldson and Elmes.

Although only 23 years old when he and Elmes formed their partnership, Donaldson was already a skilled lithographer. Orphaned at the age of ten, William M. Donaldson was raised by an aunt in Newport, Kentucky. He attended school across the river in Cincinnati, and in January 1855, at the age of 15, Donaldson was apprenticed to the lithograph firm of Middleton, Wallace & Company, the printing house which later added Hines Strobridge as a partner and ultimately evolved into the Strobridge Lithographing Company. During his time at Middleton, Wallace and Company, young Bill Donaldson learned the art of lithography from a master. According to family lore he was apprenticed to a printer named Frabronius, step-son of Alois

Senefelder, the Prague-born actor and artist who is credited with originating the process of stone lithography.

When the firm of Donaldson and Elmes opened for business in August 1863 the only capital assets in the shop were two hand presses which they operated themselves. Success came quickly, however, and within a year they had four presses running, along with a team of artists and printers. Throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s the company continued to grow, moving from general printing to chromolithography, focusing on landscapes and pastoral scenes which were popular in homes at the time.

Following the death of Elmes in 1872, Donaldson became the sole proprietor of the firm that now bore his name, and in 1889 the Donaldson Lithographing Company printed its first four-color show bill. The circus world responded and in short order Donaldson was competing directly against cross-town rival Strobridge, which by the late 1880s had become well known among showmen and was now printing tens of thousands of lithographs each season emblazoned with images of elephants, clowns and horses designed to herald the arrival of shows bearing the names of Sells, Forepaugh and Barnum.

In 1898 Donaldson decided to move his operation to the former Dueber Watch Case factory at the corner of Sixth and Washington Streets in Newport, Kentucky. Business was booming and within a few years the factory was expanded and Donaldson soon was operating the largest printing house south of the Ohio River. By 1914 a second factory was built on the site of the former Central Covington Stockyards in Covington, Kentucky. That second plant was the forerunner of what was to become the Donaldson Art Sign Company, a separate operation that specialized in tin signs, ornamental powder cans, and other



The Buffalo Bill Wild West Show used many lithographers over the decades. Donaldson was not a primary supplier to the show, yet this is a fine example of a poster produced by the firm circa 1900. A similar version of this artwork was produced by the Weiners lithographic company of Paris and used during Buffalo Bill's tour of France in 1905. Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

metal items requiring graphics.

The Donaldson Lithographing Company was now a family enterprise, headed by William M. Donaldson whose four sons, William H., Archibald, Andrew and Lincoln, were learning the company business, an enterprise which by the turn of the century employed





While few examples of Donaldson posters survive from this era, this 1906 one-sheet for Forepaugh-Sells exemplifies the outstanding work provided by the firm's artists. The Wolkowsky Troupe of Russian dancers returned to Europe after the 1906 season, and in 1907 Germany's Friedlander lithograph company produced a fine poster for the act. Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection

two hundred people who created bills for circuses, magic and minstrel shows and theatrical presentations such as Uncle Tom's Cabin. Although very few examples of early Donaldson posters survive, those that exist in museums and private collections are comparable to the very best lithography of the era.

In addition to its contribution to the world of show printing, the Donaldson family left another legacy to the entertainment world that continues to this day. As the poster business was thriving, and the firm began competing against such respected printers as Courier and Strobridge, William M. Donaldson's eldest son, William H. Donaldson, began traveling across the country as a sales representative for the lithograph company, meeting with not only the premier showmen of the time, but also with billposters and advertising agencies who placed the company's creations in every city and hamlet across the nation.

In the fall of 1894, at the age of 30, the younger Donaldson and a friendly competitor, James H. Hennegan, came up with the idea for a magazine which would be targeted to "poster printers, bill posters, advertising agents and secretaries of fairs." *Billboard Advertising*, the new magazine, made its first appearance on November 1, 1894. Originally a monthly, it was eight pages of newsprint and cost ten cents (90 cents for a full year's subscription). The new magazine was a smashing success, and by its first anniversary, *Billboard Advertising* was running a steady 16 pages and a one-year subscription was up to one dollar.

In June 1896, the first hints of entertainment coverage started slipping into *Billboard Advertising* with the introduction of a Fair Department. By 1902, *Billboard* had become the Bible of the entertainment world, and the cover included the banner "Dramatic, Operatic, Burlesque, Circus, Billposters." Not only did that sum up the entertainment scene of the early twentieth century, but it also defined *Billboard's* priorities.

After leaving the family printing business in 1903 to concentrate on *Billboard*, William H. Donaldson eventually turned day-to-day operation of the magazine over to his son-in-law Roger Littleford. Following relocation to New York, Donaldson began spending several weeks a year on the west coast of Florida where his long-time friends John and Charles Ringling were developing large tracts of real estate by the early 1920s. In the winter of 1924, William H. Donaldson, the founder of *Billboard* retired to Sarasota, Florida where he died unexpectedly on August 1, 1925. Following his death *Billboard* separated from the immediate Donaldson family and was thereafter managed by Littleford and his heirs. It dropped its coverage of outdoor entertainment at the end of 1960, becoming exclusively a music industry trade paper in January 1961. In 1985 the Littleford family sold Billboard Publications Inc. to a

group of the magazine's managers.

Despite the success that Donaldson had during the late 1890s and early 1900s, a dispute with a rival printer soon developed into a lawsuit over intellectual property which has become a landmark copyright case that is now part of all law school curriculums. The plaintiff in the case was George Bleistein, owner of the Courier Lithographing Company. In the late 1890s Courier had been hired by circus owner Ben Wallace to design and produce a number of posters used to promote his Great Wallace Shows. The posters were typical of the era and featured several of the show's headliners, including the Stirk Family of bicyclists, a living statue act, and a ballet performed by "The Sisters Maccari."

The lawsuit developed after Wallace made the decision to have Donaldson reproduce Courier's work when he ran out of paper, rather than ordering more from the Buffalo printer. Courier (and Bleistein, in name) sued Donaldson for copyright infringement.





## J. H. LA PEARL'S GREAT ALLIED SHOWS



As early as the 1890s Donaldson produced stock posters, artwork that was pre-produced and less expensive than custom lithographs. This stock poster for the J.H. LaPearl Great Allied Shows was available to any showman who wanted his own title printed above the lion's head. Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

ment in 1899. Donaldson's position was that the posters were merely advertisements, not works of art, and thus should not be considered eligible for copyright protection under either the Constitution of the United States or the controlling Copyright Act of 1874.

The United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit agreed with Donaldson and said that the posters were not "fine art" and therefore not subject to copyright protection. In fact, in his opinion, Judge Walter Evans said that the artwork on the posters, especially the ballet and living statue lithographs, was "immoral," stating: "The court cannot bring its mind to yield to the conclusion that such tawdry pictures as these were ever meant to be given the enormous protection of the exclusive right to print them."

Courier appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States where Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., writing for the court's majority in 1903, found that it was irrelevant that the posters were made for advertising. Justice Holmes laid out a ruling which, for the first time, declared that advertising was subject to copyright protection. In his opinion Holmes foretold the appreciation that future generations would have for the posters which, a century later would be admired and collected for their artistic value: "It would be a dangerous undertaking for persons trained only to the law to constitute themselves final judges of the worth of pictorial illustrations, outside of the narrowest and most obvious limits. At the one extreme, some works of genius would be sure to miss appreciation. Their very novelty would make them repulsive until the public had learned the new language in which their author spoke. It may be more than doubted, for instance, whether the etchings of Goya or the paintings of Manet would have been sure of protection when seen for the first time. At the other end, copyright would be denied to pictures which appealed to a public less educated than the judge. Yet if they command the interest of any public,

they have a commercial value—it would be bold to say that they have not an aesthetic and educational value—and the taste of any public is not to be treated with contempt."

A dissenting opinion was submitted by Justice John Marshall Harlan. He agreed with the Sixth Circuit that advertising posters "would not be promotive of the useful arts within the meaning of the constitutional provision," and were therefore not "fine art" for which the Constitution permitted protection.

Despite their differences in the courtroom, William M. Donaldson and Courier's George Bliestein believed that in order for the show printing industry to stand fast during the era of reform and "trust busting," an association should be formed to, according to an account in the *New York Times*, to "protect the interest of the members." Among the members of the new Poster Printers Association were

nearly all of the big printers of the time. In addition to Courier and Donaldson, the association, founded in November of 1902, also included Erie Litho and Printing of Erie, Pennsylvania, the Enquirer Job Printing Company of Cincinnati, W. J. Morgan of Cleveland and Riverside of Milwaukee. In fact, the only major show printing firm that was not included, and notable by its absence, was the Strobridge Lithographing Company of Cincinnati.

This combination created a holding company known as both The United States Printing Company and Consolidated Lithograph Co., the latter a New Jersey Corporation organized on March 25, 1905 to hold stock in the above mentioned printers (with the exception of Enquirer and Riverside) along with United States Lithographing of Norwood, Ohio, Russell-Morgan Co. of Cincinnati, the Metropolitan Printing Company of New York and Walker Printing of Erie, Pennsylvania. According to *The United States Investor* magazine

By the time this photograph was taken about 1902, several hundred employees worked at the Donaldson plant in Newport, Kentucky, including this group of workers in the "color room" where various color stones were handled prior to a press run. At the time this photo was taken the crew was working on an order for the Great Wallace Shows. Author's Collection





of January 23, 1909, the companies operated independently and that together "these subsidiary companies are said to control 90 percent of the theater and circus bill printing in the United States." The president of Consolidated Lithographic was John Omwake of the Russell-Morgan (U. S. Printing) firm and the secretary was William M. Donaldson.

For many years the Donaldson family and the Ringling Bros. had a cordial relationship, as evidenced by an extensive collection of letters between the Donaldsons and various members of Ringling management, now in the Pfening Archives. Prior to 1908 Donaldson's work for the Ringling organization appears to be tied to small printing orders such as letterhead, and poster printing done for the Ringling-operated Forepaugh-Sells circus. Now with the purchase of Barnum & Bailey, Donaldson and its partners in the United States Printing Company had the opportunity to work with the newly crowned circus kings to promote their mighty shows. In a letter from Arch Donaldson to Charles Ringling on November 29, 1907 he vowed to, "devote our entire plant to any work that you can give us" and offered to come to Baraboo, winter home of the Ringlings, the following week to discuss the next season's printing.

Correspondence between Charles Ringling and Arch Donaldson in the weeks leading up to the Barnum & Bailey opening in Madison Square Garden on March 19, 1908 indicates that the new owners of The Greatest Show on Earth wanted to make a big splash with their advertising and three of the firms in the holding company, Courier, Russell-Morgan and Donaldson, were contracted to supplement the work that Strobridge was providing.

On January 6, 1908 Charles Ringling wrote Donaldson, informing him that 22 lithograph designs ranging from one-sheets to 24-sheets would be needed for the coming season. The order

called for eight designs for Ringling Bros. and 14 designs for Barnum & Bailey. It appears that the artwork would be executed by Courier, and later correspondence indicated the posters were printed and shipped by Russell-Morgan and Donaldson. Ringling required 2,000 copies of each of the posters that were three-sheet or larger. Of the six one-sheet designs ordered, 5,000 copies of each were required. The total order consisted of 62,000 posters at a cost of between three-and-a-half cents for a one-sheet and 72 cents for a 24 sheet. The entire order was for \$9,230 which, when adjusted for inflation, is now valued at more than \$200,000.

The letters between Charles Ringling and Arch Donaldson indicate that Courier, Russell-Morgan and Donaldson were working together on the project, yet there were a number of challenges that became evident as the three individual printing houses raced against the calendar to develop concepts and sketches, then print and ship the posters that would herald the openings of Barnum & Bailey at New York's Madison Square Garden on March 19 and Ringling Bros. at the Chicago Coliseum on April 2.

Because of the immediate nature of the project, and the fact that artwork approval and printing instructions were too detailed for a telegram, letters were being exchanged several times a week between Donaldson and Ringling management. In addition to the new posters that were being ordered, in early 1908 Donaldson was also contracted to strip off the Forepaugh-Sells title from billboard sized pictorials that were on the shelves in Baraboo and replace the paper with the Barnum & Bailey title.

Despite the best intentions of Arch Donaldson, fulfilling the printing order was a challenge, fraught with delays and problems that tested the patience of Charles Ringling. Ringling made it clear that hard deadlines must be met, yet Donaldson misdirected poster

These three lithographs, produced by the Courier Company of Buffalo, were the focus of a landmark copyright case. When circus owner Ben Wallace took these posters to Donaldson to have them reproduced, Courier sued. The United States Supreme Court ruled that advertising is subject to the same copyright laws as literary works and fine art. Library of Congress collection.





shipments and didn't meet the printing deadlines. In a letter from Arch Donaldson to Charles Ringling dated February 29, 1908, Donaldson expresses his regret, and informs Ringling that despite the fact the New York opening was just days away they would miss the deadline with 10 of the posters, ranging from one-sheets to 24-sheets. Donaldson apologizes by writing, "it is the first time Donaldson has been late with your printing," and added, "it is not my fault that the sketches came in late," presumably artwork that Courier was to have provided.

Charles Ringling was clearly exasperated when he responded, "We are astonished by this and cannot understand why so few of them are done." He also wrote that Donaldson was apparently pro-

Although the Donaldson and Ringling families had a cordial business relationship, it produced almost nothing in the way of work following the 1908 season. This one-sheet was produced by Donaldson for the Ringling Bros. New York premiere in 1909, the first time that circus exhibited at Madison Square Garden. Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.



viding posters that hadn't been a part of the order, stating, "Concerning the one-sheet Neverros; we will say that we have no record ever having ordered this bill, and would thank you to send us a copy of this order as we do not want it." (Author's note: A January 6 letter from Charles Ringling to Donaldson does indeed order 5,000 copies of a Barnum & Bailey one-sheet upright promoting "Neverros.") In closing, Ringling said, "We hope you will make a special effort to get all of the paper ordered for New York there for use." The issues involving late shipments continued throughout the summer of 1908 as evidenced by the continuing correspondence between Donaldson and Ringling executives.

Following the 1908 season, the Ringling Bros. entered into an exclusive agreement with the Strobridge Lithographing Company to provide all of the pictorial lithography for not only Barnum & Bailey, but also Ringling Bros. This arrangement with Strobridge continued for 20 years, with one known exception. In early February of 1909, the well-liked William H. Donaldson, publisher of *Billboard*, made a trip to Baraboo to see both the Gollmar and Ringling Bros., apparently to ensure that there were no hard feelings following the previous season's debacle in New York. Whether it was Donaldson's charm or the largesse of Charles Ringling,

on February 12, 1909 the following letter, now in the Pfening Archives, was written to Arch Donaldson: "My dear Donaldson: I had the pleasure of meeting with your brother here Wednesday and appreciated his call very much. I want to stay on a friendly footing with the Donaldson boys and by all means. Just to show our good feeling I am enclosing you copy for a one sheet bill for Ringling Bros. If you will do this bill and express it to New York to be there March 10 we will have one Donaldson bill anyway. If you are crowded and think the subject too difficult throw it in the waste paper basket, but you will not be able to say we didn't offer you a bill for 1909, even if our contract says we cannot."

The 1909 season marked the first time that the Ringling Bros. Circus appeared in New York's Madison Square Garden, traditional site of the Barnum & Bailey spring opening, and Donaldson responded with a poster that was only used during that engagement, which began March 25. Only one known example of that lithograph survives, part of the Howard Tibbals collection at the Ringling Museum. It is reproduced here.

A final letter from Charles Ringling to William M. Donaldson in December of 1911 explains the exclusive arrangement that the Ringling's have with Strobridge but does tell the company's founder that should his son Arch want to stop by his Baraboo office during a trip to visit the Gollmars that winter, "I should be very happy to shake hands with him and have a little talk on the matter of printing as well." It is not known whether such a meeting occurred.

The years leading up to the Great Depression saw Donaldson splitting the firm into two divisions. The Donaldson Metal Art Company (later Donaldson Art Sign Company) of Covington was now managed by William M. Donaldson's son Arch, while the Donaldson Lithographing Company, which was responsible for poster printing, was now operated by sons Andrew and Lincoln. While the new Metal Art company produced permanent signs for businesses and consumer goods, Donaldson Lithographing continued to produce posters for shows such as the John Robinson Circus, Hagenbeck





Donaldson supplied lithographs to other branches of show business such as minstrel shows. This John W. Vogel one sheet dates from about 1905. Minstrel shows often featured circus acts such as the Marvelous Marseilles, a contortionist. Pfening Archives.

Wallace, Walter L. Main and M.L. Clark and Sons. In addition to the custom illustrations produced by the Donaldson artists, beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the 1930s, the firm distributed illustrated catalogues featuring dozens of popular designs used by circuses, fairs and magicians. Smaller shows could have high quality posters simply by buying a stock image and having their own title printed in a blank area above the image.

As the color presses at Donaldson churned out brilliant pictorial scenes that would be packaged and shipped to advance cars across the nation where they would be splashed on the sides of walls and in store windows, elsewhere in the plant smaller, but no less important, printing orders were being fulfilled for circuses and other traveling shows. In addition to the window and wall work provided by Donaldson, each season the firm produced thousands of inexpensive heralds and handbills which featured elaborate graphics and promotional prose. These heralds, a forerunner of direct-mail campaigns that became popular in the late twentieth century, were usually printed on both sides and had an open space where the date and location of the coming show could be stamped prior to distribution.

The Great Depression had an immediate effect on a number of small shows and the poster printers that kept many of them afloat by extending credit. In the fall of 1929, the Gentry Bros. Circus, owned by Floyd and Howard King, was forced to close in Paris, Tennessee, with Donaldson Lithographing holding the note on the

show for nonpayment of printing bills. After taking possession of the show, most of the equipment was sent to the Hagenbeck-Wallace winter quarters in West Baden, Indiana where it was sold. One significant piece of circus history, the old John Robinson caliope, was not sold, as Andrew Donaldson donated it to the then-new Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan where it remains today. Shortly thereafter, on October 22, 1931, William M. Donaldson, family patriarch and founder of the companies which carried his name died at the age of 91. During his years leading the firm Donaldson had become an active member of the community and a philanthropist for a number of causes throughout the Cincinnati metropolitan area.

As more circuses became motorized in the 1930s, Donaldson continued its role in promoting the shows across the length and breadth of the nation, printing and shipping lithos to billposters who worked for shows such as Downie Bros., Barnett Bros., Sam Dill and a number of indoor circuses that were becoming popular during the 1930s. Among the last custom posters produced by Donaldson were a series executed in 1934 for Russell Bros. and several designs for the new Tom Mix Circus in 1935.

The Great Depression not only forced many circuses off the road in the late 1930s, the hard economic times brought back the efficiencies created through a jointly held company of which Donaldson had first been a part some 30 years before. While most of the firms in Consolidated Litho had faded from the scene by the late 1930s, Donaldson, along with U. S. Printing of Norwood, Ohio (which had evolved from the Russell-Morgan firm), and Erie Lithographing and Printing publicly embraced the alliance now titled The United States Printing and Lithographing Company. About 1938 the poor economy required further consolidation of



In addition to posters, Donaldson produced heralds. The example below was a sample Donaldson sent out to prospective customers who could customize the handbill by choosing the sections they wanted on their bills. Pfening Archives.

**CIRCUS QUARTER SHEET NO. 3**  
PLACE FOR NAME OF  
**SHOWS**  
FROM THE DONALDSON LITHO. CO. NEWPORT, KY.  
Divided into Sections and any Section can be substituted for another from either sample sheet, but no cut or reading can be changed in a Section, as it is in one piece.

**DOUBLE SOMERSAULT LEAPING**  
By the world's champion leapers, making the longest leaps on record. A revival of one of the most popular Circus Features in the past, and presented as a feature with this show.  
**Leading, Long and Lofty Leapers**  
In a thrilling and amazing revival of famous  
**INTERNATIONAL LEAPING TOURNAMENTS**  
Now of mighty muscles and spring-like stances contend for the World's Championship.  
**High and Long Distance Jumping**  
Over Elephants, Camels and other animals and inanimate objects.  
With maximum gained by horse of speed down a long incline, they bound from a spring-board and revolve in fast turning  
**SINGLE, DOUBLE AND TRIPLE SOMERSAULTS IN MID-AIR**

**A TROUPE OF WONDERFUL HORSEMEN!**  
Hurricane Horse Riding,  
Marksmanship on Fast Riding  
Horses, Picking Up Objects  
While on Fast Speeding  
Horses, Strenuous Stunts  
and Playful Featuress.

These Absolute Fearless Horsemen will be seen in Feats of Reckless, Dare-Devil Rough-Riding.

**TWO COMPLETE EXHIBITIONS DAILY AT 2 AND 8 P. M.**  
DOORS OPEN ONE HOUR EARLIER.  
EVERY MORNING AT TEN O'CLOCK  
GIVEN FREE ON THE PUBLIC STREETS  
**THE BIG NEW STREET PARADE**  
Presenting Miles of Gorgeous Pageantry of Orient and Occident. Original in Conception, Beautiful and Bewildering in Execution.  
A SUPERB-SPLENDID, SPECTACULAR, UNUSUAL AND UNCOMMON KIDNEY TO FOLLOW.

**WILL EXHIBIT AT**



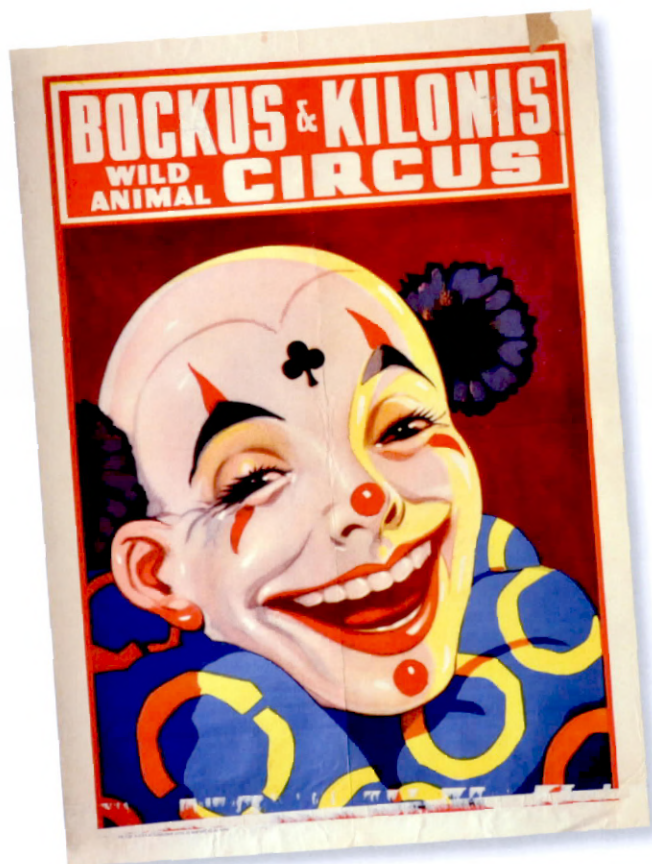
A stock Donaldson half sheet from 1932. "Sample No Commercial Use" is stamped on the white horse on front left, meaning this poster was sent as a sample to a potential customer. Pfening Archives.

the three firms and the Newport, Kentucky printing operation was shuttered. The printing of circus posters was now being executed for the group at the Erie, Pennsylvania plant with a Donaldson sales office located in Norwood.

While some of the stock images associated with Donaldson continued to be used into the 1940s by shows such as Hamid-Morton and Monroe Bros., the Donaldson title, which had appeared as a subtle line printed on the bottom of thousands of circus posters, had now vanished forever, replaced by "Erie Litho and Ptg." or the slogan "Another U.S. Poster."

Although the Donaldson presses stopped printing circus posters prior to World War II, the Donaldson family continued to be a part of the Cincinnati area printing industry for several more decades. Andrew Donaldson, Jr., moved from the family business to the Strobridge Lithographing Company, completing a circle which started when his grandfather, William M. Donaldson, began his apprenticeship at Middleton, Wallace and Company, the company that later became Strobridge. Andrew Donaldson, Jr., who as Vice President of Strobridge, was instrumental in saving an important chapter in circus history by donating four sample volumes of Strobridge posters from 1882 to the Cincinnati Art Museum when the firm was sold to the H.S. Crocker Company in 1960.





Donaldson supplied stock posters to the Bockus and Kilonis Circus in 1936, its only season. In many ways the show was a typical circus customer: small, unsuccessful and short-lived. Pfening Archives.

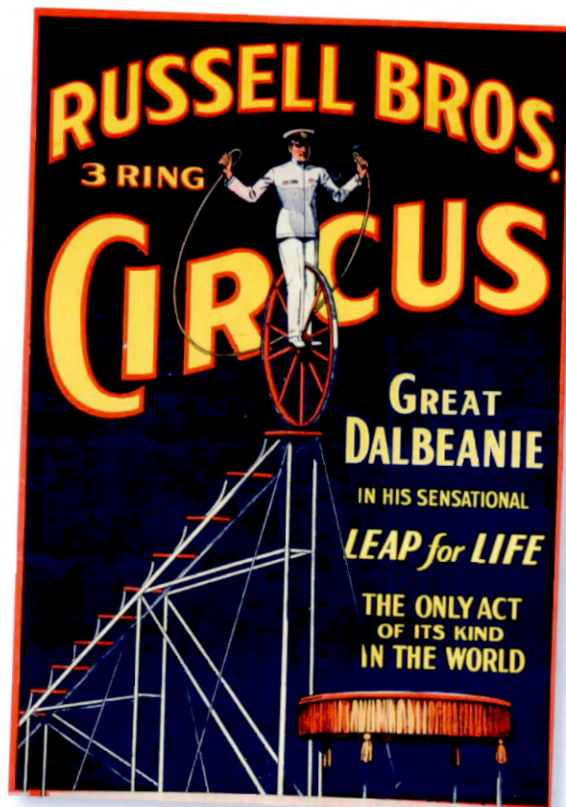
Meanwhile, the Donaldson Art Sign Company continued to produce advertising into the late twentieth century, focusing on metal items such as soft drink thermometers and other advertising signage lithographed on tin and aluminum. Ownership of the

Donaldson ad from 1937 *Billboard*. The company was able to survive much of the Great Depression through its association with the United States Printing and Lithographing Company, but by 1939 all poster printing had moved to its sister-firm, the Erie Lithographing Company in Erie, Pennsylvania. John Polacsek collection

**CLASSY INDOOR SHOWS  
RATE BIG TIME POSTERS**

The public sizes up your show by the posters.  
Donaldson Posters and Cards have that big-time brilliance and flair that attract crowds.  
The new 1937 designs are lithographed in four and five radiant colors . . . full range of sizes for every use. Prices gladly sent on request. Immediate delivery.

**DONALDSON**  
DIVISION OF THE UNITED STATES PRINTING & LITHOGRAPH CO.  
NORWOOD, CINCINNATI, OHIO



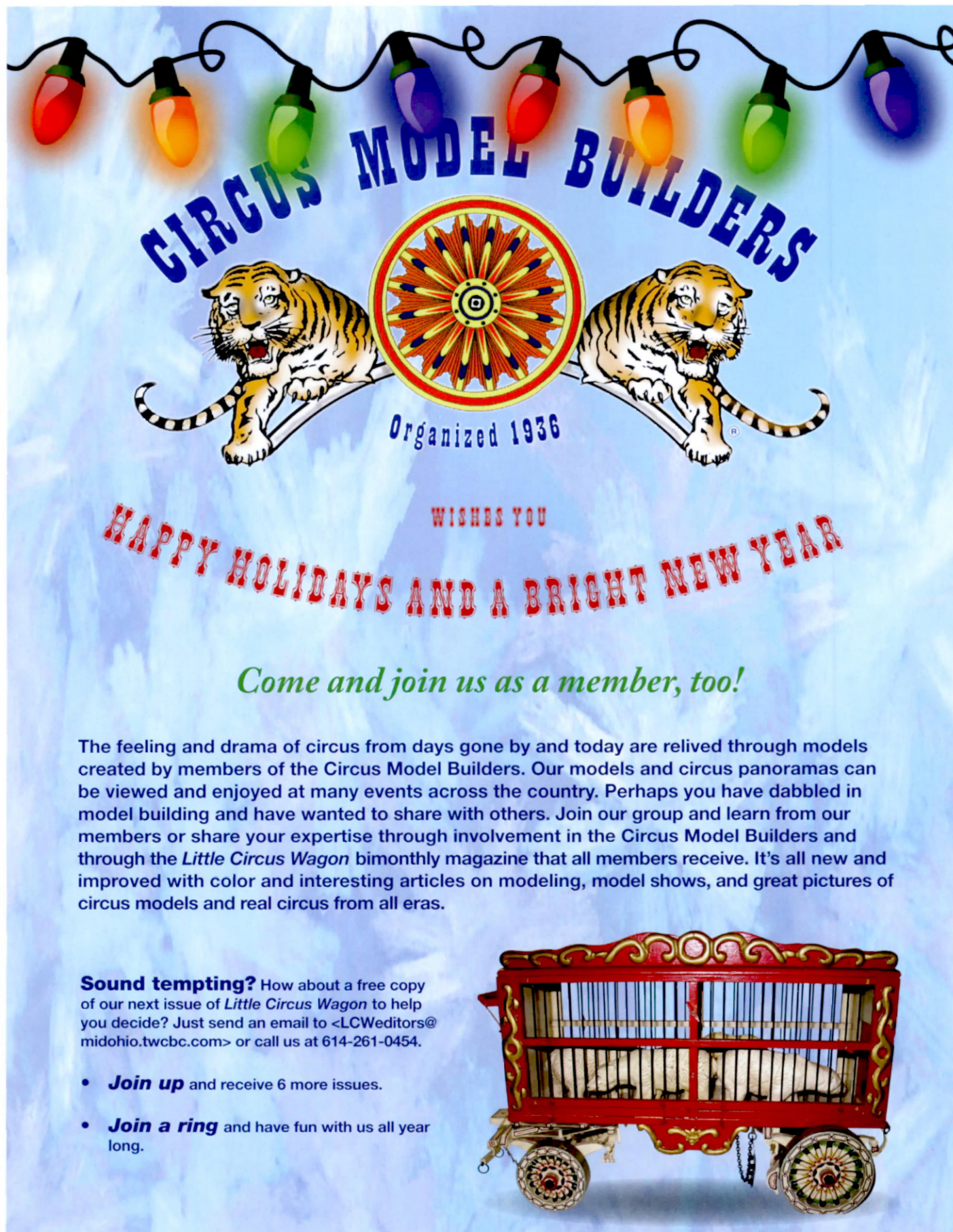
Among the last set of "custom posters" executed by Donaldson were a group of lithographs commissioned by C.W. Webb for his Russell Bros Circus in the mid-1930s. In addition to this poster, similar pieces were executed for contortionist W.H. Whitlark, equestrian Frank Miller, and Bob Fisher's Five Fearless Flyers. Ringling Museum of Art, Tibbals Digital Collection.

Art Sign Company remained in the Donaldson family until 1981 when it was sold to a former company vice president. In 1987 the Donaldson Art Sign Company declared bankruptcy and three years later the abandoned plant was destroyed by a fire set by a 15-year old. Shortly after the devastating fire, the land where the old Covington factory had stood was declared a Superfund cleanup site by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Although little tangible remains today, the impact of the Donaldson family on the history of American entertainment and the circus is significant. Nearly 150 years ago a young man started his business in the shadow of the Civil War, and with skill and ambition he and his sons became pioneers in the nation's advertising industry, promoting the live entertainment forms available at the time, and developing a business acumen which required neutrality when dealing with customers who were bitter rivals. The legacy of the Donaldson family exists today through an important trade magazine, which now focuses on the music industry rather than circuses and fairs, along with a landmark legal case and some scattered artifacts and surviving posters from an era that has slipped from the consciousness of contemporary culture. It is hoped that this essay will memorialize the Donaldsons' contributions to the history of the American circus.

For their assistance in the preparation of this article, the author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of John Polacsek, Fred Pfening III, The Tibbals Digital Collection, Deborah Walk, The Ringling Museum of the American Circus, Dave Price, Dick Flint and Fred Dahlinger. **BW**





The feeling and drama of circus from days gone by and today are relived through models created by members of the Circus Model Builders. Our models and circus panoramas can be viewed and enjoyed at many events across the country. Perhaps you have dabbled in model building and have wanted to share with others. Join our group and learn from our members or share your expertise through involvement in the Circus Model Builders and through the *Little Circus Wagon* bimonthly magazine that all members receive. It's all new and improved with color and interesting articles on modeling, model shows, and great pictures of circus models and real circus from all eras.

**Sound tempting?** How about a free copy of our next issue of *Little Circus Wagon* to help you decide? Just send an email to <LCWeditors@midohio.twcbc.com> or call us at 614-261-0454.

- **Join up** and receive 6 more issues.
- **Join a ring** and have fun with us all year long.







*Season's Greetings* to one and all in the circus world  
and best wishes for a terrific 2012!

*The North and Royal families and everyone at **Kelly Miller***

photo by Ryan Easley. Additional illustration by Howard Pace.



# Secrets of Circus and Theatrical Business. A Guide-Book For Musicians.

*The following piece is reproduced from a booklet, measuring 4 3/4" x 6 3/4" and containing twenty pages, published by the J. W. Pepper & Son music publishing company of Philadelphia in 1887. While the pamphlet is clearly an infomercial for the firm's vast catalog of sheet music, it provides insight into circus music and circus musicians of the 1880s. Founded in 1876, the firm also printed instruction books for instruments, fabricated drums, and published a trade paper called Musical Times. This last appears to have carried circus band news, making it a potentially useful source for research into field show music. The company is still in business, and is the largest sheet music retailer in the United States with its biggest customers being school and church music directors. Fred D. Pfening III*

## PREFACE.

A long experience in Circus and Show business generally has proved that there is plenty of room in it for musicians, and that no business pays a better average salary than this.

There is a great desire on the part of amateur musicians to enter this kind of life, but, as a rule, they are ignorant of the best way to accomplish their desire; and so great is their anxiety to secure such situations that they frequently offer a heavy bonus for the chance of such an engagement, as much for the opportunity to see the country as for the sake of the salary.

With the assistance of the hints contained in this volume, any musician, amateur or professional, who is a fair reader and executant, can obtain a pleasant and lucrative engagement, and go to work understandingly, like an old and experienced professional, thereby obviating the embarrassment that a beginner naturally feels in entering a new and untried employment.

## MUSICIANS' GUIDE-BOOK FOR THE Circus and Theatrical Business.

### SECTION I.

#### Circus Business. Best Mode of Obtaining an Engagement. Duties of Same When Secured.

Circus shows generally "lay up" during the cold months, and in this interval from active traveling labor various business is transacted by the heads of the different departments, and engagements

closed for the ensuing season. Leaders, as a rule, engage their bands for the coming season between the months of December and March or April, and the term of contract is usually from twenty-four to thirty weeks. All engagements are made under a written contract, signed by and binding each party; and the usual time for beginning the campaign is about May 1st.

All applications for engagements should be made to the Leader, who is the supreme authority of the musical department. If you are acquainted with the address of any leader, either see him personally or write him by mail, stating what instrument or instruments you perform on, previous experience (if any), and amount of salary desired, of which more hereafter. If you do not know the address of any leader, watch the columns of some prominent amusement or musical journal, or better still, insert an advertisement somewhat as follows:

To Band Leaders.

**SITUATION WANTED**—A first-class musician wants engagement to travel with a Circus. Plays second violin and alto (or whatever other instruments you perform on). Well up in the business.

Address, JOHN J. SMITH, INGLE-SIDE, (Calhoun County) PENNSYLVANIA.

Another style:

Notice to Leaders.

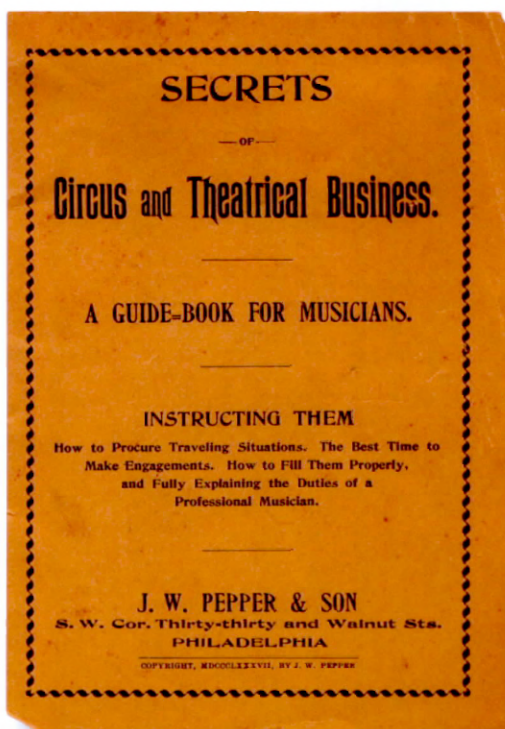
A Good Cornet Player wishes an engagement with a Circus the coming season. Address, etc.

N. B.—The *Musical Times*, published by J. W. Pepper & Son, Thirty third and Walnut Streets, Philadelphia, Pa., is received monthly by every leader: in the United States and Canada, and is an excellent medium of advertising for musical situations. All advertisements of this character are published free of charge.

No matter what instrument you play, or how many, when advertising mention them all; write your address—name, county, town and state—plainly and the leaders

will soon find you out.

Another good idea, during the season, is to apply personally to all leaders who come your way, as it sometimes happens that they are short of a man through some cause or another, or that they may be able to recommend you to some leader who stands in need of your services. At any rate, an acquaintance with them does no harm, and may be of service "in the sweet bye-and-bye."



Cover for booklet for aspiring musicians published by J. W. Pepper & Son in 1887. Pfening Archives.





The 1881 Barnum and London Circus band. Director James Robinson is seated in front with elbow on drum. Pfening Archives.

As regards the amount of salaries, they vary somewhat, according to the size and standing of the company, but a general average is from \$15.00 to \$18.00 per week and traveling fares for the men, and all the way from \$25.00 to \$50.00 for the leader.

## SECTION II.

### To Leaders—Various Remarks of Utility.

There are many leaders of town and country bands who would like to travel with a Circus, and who are fully capable of furnishing the musical part of the entertainment, but who do not understand how to secure the engagement, or the exact routine of the business after being engaged. Like all other apparently difficult things, it is simple when you understand it, and this chapter will explain it so fully that you can lead a Circus show as easily as a town parade.

In the first place, you must have a band capable of playing both in brass and string music. Of course the brass band will be the feature, and if some of your band can play violins, clarinets and piccolo, you can make up a fair string band, something like the following list: First and second violin, clarinet, flute or piccolo, one or two cornets, and baritone, trombone and tuba. The uses of the string band will be defined hereafter.

In order for a leader to procure a situation, he should write to any Circus managers whom he may know, either personally or by reputation, and also insert an advertisement, worded something as follows, in the *New York Clipper* or *Pepper's Band Journal*:

#### TO CIRCUS MANAGERS

The subscriber can furnish brass and string band for the coming season. Address, .....

If, after having come to terms with a manager, you should be short of the number of pieces you desire or have contracted for, insert another advertisement in the following form:

**WANTED**—The following musicians to travel with a Circus the coming season: 1 B♭ for brass and string; 1 second alto to play 1st violin, etc. (mention whatever instruments you are in need of). Salaries must be low, as they are sure. Address, .....

Such an advertisement is tolerably certain to bring all the replies you need.

When you have engaged with a manager, ascertain the time and place from which the company starts, and get your band there about a week beforehand for rehearsals and practice.

Now then, for the customary routine of business.

The first requisite is to be sufficiently well stocked with music to carry you through the season. The proper kind of music consists of quicksteps, gallops, waltzes, quadrilles and two or three light overtures (if you wish) for brass; and several sets of quadrilles, waltzes,

polkas, gallops, jigs and reels for string.

Sometimes the performers have their own manuscript music for their acts, but not often, and it generally devolves upon the leader to make an appropriate selection for their act.

The day's work will be something like this: Every day at 10 o'clock a procession on the street. For this, quicksteps and quick marches in brass, such as the "Burlington," "Constellation," "Yellow Fellow," "Belle of New York," "Birthday" and "Brownies" Marches, all of which, with many others, are published by us, and are so arranged as to be played with fine effect by from eight to twenty men. (Send for our full descriptive catalogue of band music and

leaders' requirements generally.)

After the parade, dinner (no music required). The Circus doorway opens at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, and 7 o'clock in the evening; performances beginning at 2 and 8 o'clock. The leader must have his band on hand when the door opens, either outside or inside the tent, as the manager may direct, and should play at intervals of about every fifteen minutes, performing such music as he pleases—something like "Over the Waves Waltzes," "Jolly Fellows Waltzes," "Lively Hottentots—Dance," or similar selections, which can be found in great abundance in our catalogue.

(Right here it may be well to remark that the music is a great feature in a show, and that the leader who is always up with the times in good, fresh, pleasing selections, invariably gains the good will of an audience, and also the *approbation of his manager*: Remember, that what is new music to an audience, becomes an exceedingly stale story to the attachees of the Circus if they are obliged to hear the same pieces twice or three times a day for weeks and months. It is well therefore to frequently buy fresh music and surprise their ears occasionally with something new. You may be certain it will be appreciated and redound to your own advantage.)

To resume: After having played three or four pieces before the show, get your places for the first act of the ring, commonly called the "grand entré." The music for this is always a promenade or common-time march, such as "The Pride of the Ball," or "P. T. Barnum's Grand Processional March," both of which are published by us, and have been used with great satisfaction by many Circus leaders. The march continues until the equestrian manager gives you the signal to change, when you immediately change to a gallop, finishing it up double fortissimo as the procession goes out of the ring. (The "Iron Horse" or the "Hip, Hi Circus" gallops, published by us, are very appropriate for this purpose.)

Before the "grand entré" the leader will have procured a programme, and will thus have the order of performance before him, and the musicians will arrange their music accordingly.

After the "grand entré" it was formerly customary to play the balance of the show with string music, but it is now done with brass, all except the songs of the clown and the minstrel show, of which more hereafter.

For all riding acts it is best to play a quadrille (6-8 tempo) until the finish of the act, and then break into a gallop when the rider makes his last change and exit. Always begin playing when the horse starts, and play any one number of the quadrille until the rider sits down (always stop music when the rider sits down, no matter what part of the figure you are in). Resume the music when the rider gets up, and, as before remarked, finish with a gallop. (The fifth figure of most quadrilles will make a long enough gallop.) Always at the entrance and exit of an act, into and from the ring,



give a long fortissimo chord, and roll on the drum.

Music for leaping over horses, and such acts, is generally a gallop or set of jigs or reels, like "The Devil Tied Up," or "The Bottled Imp," two immense selections from our brass band catalogue. Or, if using strings, the "Minstrel Medley," or the "Ten Reels and Jigs" from our Theatrical and Dance Journal.

*Music for Trapeze:* Play a nice, smooth waltz.

*Music for Horizontal Bar:* A lively gallop.

*Music for Contortion Act:* Waltz.

*Music for Tumbling Act:* Gallop, or Reels and Jigs.

Any other special features introduced in the show, that you are in doubt about, ask the equestrian manager for information. It is his business to give you the proper instructions.

In playing for educated animals, such as trick horses, dancing elephants, etc., you will have to use your own judgment in selecting music, and endeavor as nearly as possible to play to their time, as they cannot be taught to keep time to you.

All Circuses give a Concert or Minstrel Entertainment in the ring after the close of the Circus proper, and for this you only need a part of your band, say from five to six pieces two violins, clarinet, cornet and bass, with flute and trombone if desired. If you have a large band, you can generally manage so that the musicians can take "turns about," a week at a time, for this "snap." Sometimes it pays extra, and sometimes not. Always settle that point when making your engagement for the season.

The leader must ascertain who the stage manager of the Minstrel Show is, and from him get a programme of the performance, and see what he has to do. As a rule the Concert and Minstrel performers furnish their own music for their songs, and the leader is supposed to be provided with the necessary number of clogs, jigs, reels and hornpipes for the occasion, and also the "First Part Overture," for which a good, rattling gallop, with coda (like any of those contained in our Orchestra Catalogue) played short, is very appropriate.

The foregoing remarks cover about all the ground of a Circus musician's duties, and there is little more to add except general remarks, such as will serve to guide the leader in the management of his band.

In forming a band always endeavor to get together good, *sober* and *reliable* men, who are ambitious to work and get ahead in their chosen profession, and who are not given to growling or fault-finding. One "agitator" in a party will often succeed in making the band thoroughly miserable for the whole trip. The leader must, from the very start, assume and maintain the sole control of the band, as he alone is responsible for their actions and behavior.

Before closing this chapter, we wish to again call attention to the importance of having a good stock of pleasing music on hand. From our immense catalogue every variety and description of music can be had, suitable for every conceivable purpose, *and of every grade of difficulty*. Thus a leader can easily select the style of music best suited to the capabilities of his band and orchestra. It must not be supposed that easy music is poor music; or that there is "no music good without being difficult," as we have heard asserted. On the contrary, in preparing our catalogue, just as much pains, skill and care has been expended upon the simpler pieces as upon the most difficult operatic selections, and every part will be found appropriate to the particular instrument which performs it, thereby producing a fine effect in an easy manner, that is always agreeable to the listener and gratifying to the performer. A leader in ordering from us can, if he likes, give about the average capability of his band, and state what kind and how many gallops, marches, etc., he desires, and we will select such music as will fit the capacity of his performers.

By careful observance of such particulars a leader makes up a

band which is bound to give satisfaction to his chief, and gains a record which will ensure him further engagements, at probably an advanced salary.

In referring to our Catalogue of Band Music, it will be seen that we publish a number of books for brass bands, under the titles of "Premier Band Book," "Progress Band Book," "Big Bonanza Band Book," "Monarch Band Book," etc. These works are unexcelled by any publications in the world for merit, quantity and cheapness. Their convenience of form is also a great recommendation in their favor. They are instrumented for twenty men, but so arranged that they can be played by eight, *and can be led by either Eb or Bb Cornet*. The Bb Tenors, Baritone and Bass are also published in either treble or bass clef, as the purchaser may desire.

It is customary for the proprietors of a Circus, upon closing their season, to pay the performer's fare back to the place the Circus started the season from.

If the leader has given good satisfaction during his engagement, it often happens that upon the close of the trip, he is re-engaged for the succeeding season; some bands playing for years under the same management.

### SECTION III.

Theatrical Business and Various Hints on Orchestral Playing. Variety Business, Etc.

As the preceding sections of this book have related chiefly to brass band music, this chapter deals exclusively with orchestra work—bands never being used in a theatre, except occasionally, when they are introduced upon the stage in some spectacular piece or opera like "Faust," and then only for a brief scene or two.

The orchestra player's duties in a "legitimate" theatre are not so complex and varied as in a variety theatre, but generally of a far lighter degree of skill and difficulty of execution, performing standard and classic overtures, and frequently during the season "taking a whack" at opera.

The chief duties of the leader of such a theatre are to provide the music for overtures, incidental and melo-dramatic music to plays, if required, teach the choruses, and have his men together as many times a week as the stage manager directs for full rehearsal. The duties at performance are: a preliminary overture, whatever music is incidental to the piece, a musical selection between each act, a closing piece after the last act, and drawing the orchestra's salary whenever the "ghost walks" (salary day).

In a "variety" theatre, the duties of the leader are much the same, with the addition of having to attend rehearsal every day, if they have a ballet, to play the music for the ballet dancers to practice, and, generally, a full rehearsal twice a week, with perhaps two or three matinees a week.

The order of performance is something like this: First, an overture like the "Lustspiel," or "Diadem," or "Dramatic," or "Crown of Gold," from our Catalogue. Then the curtain rises, and if they have a Minstrel "first part" on, you play a Minstrel overture. Then follows a number of sentimental and comic songs, the music of which should be furnished you by the singers. Then whatever "finale" may be selected by the stage manager.

After the "first part," generally a short overture or operatic selections by the orchestra, at the conclusion of which the curtain rises for the "olio" or second part. This is a general mélange of acts, nearly all having music in them, and consisting of songs (serious, comic, sentimental and ridiculous), songs and dances, clogs, jigs, reels, hornpipes, etc. At the conclusion of the "olio," another selection by the orchestra, for which a lively set of quadrilles is best. (Medley quadrilles from popular songs and operas, such as are mentioned in



Contract between musician Walter Miller and the Ringling Bros. Circus for the 1911 season. Contract signed by Al Sweet, Ringling bandmaster. Pfening Archives.

our Orchestra Catalogue, are most appropriate for this place.)

After this selection the afterpiece or drama is performed, and in it the leader generally has occasion to use incidental music many times, for which purpose there is nothing better than our publications of "Melo-Dramatic Music, Nos. 1, 2 (each 13 numbers) and No. 3 (20 numbers)," selected and arranged by an experienced orchestra leader. If songs are introduced in the drama, the singer furnishes the music.

If the afterpiece happens to be a pantomime, the orchestra plays all the time from the beginning of the harlequinade, chiefly quadrille music. While the audience is withdrawing at the close of the performance the orchestra plays a lively selection.

These few hints sum up the duties of an orchestra leader. The duty of his men is merely to play what is put before them, and "follow their leader." There should be no broils or dissension in the orchestra, and all should work for the general good of the orchestra as a body. If they do this they will find their reward in steady employment, and renewed engagement from season to season.

The same remarks apply to the Orchestral Leader as to the Band Leader, upon the advisability of having plenty of music in his repertoire, and it is to the direct personal interest of every leader in the country to apply for our catalogues. Sample B♭ cornet and first violin parts are furnished free to Leaders, and a subscription to our monthly *Band Journal* costs only one dollar a year, with a present of one dollar's worth of music, as a premium on your subscription. By these helps no musician need be behind in the race that all are making for supremacy. **BW**

**CONTRACT BETWEEN**  
**Ringling Brothers' World's Greatest Shows**  
**AND**  
*Walter Miller* 14<sup>th</sup>

This Agreement, made and entered into this *14<sup>th</sup>* day of *October*, 191*1*, by and between RINGLING BROS., of Baraboo, Wis., parties of the first part and *Walter Miller*, party of the second part.

WITNESSETH, That in consideration of the services to be rendered, and other obligations to be fulfilled on the part of the party of the second part as hereinafter mentioned, the party of the first part agrees to pay to the party of the second part a salary of *Eighteen Dollars* (\$18.00) per week, and to furnish board and transportation, said salary, board and transportation to be paid from the time party of the second part begins to perform his several duties as hereinafter mentioned, and in no case to begin before the regular traveling season of the party of the first part.

In consideration of the obligations to be done on the part of the parties of the first part as hereinbefore mentioned, the party of the second part hereby agrees to perform the following duties, viz: *Play*  
*Trumpet in Band and*  
*Thorn in Parade*

at each performance given by the party of the first part, during the season of 191*1*. The party of the second part further agrees that in consideration of the salary paid by party of the first part, that party of the second part, realizing the hazardous nature of the occupation of an attaché of a traveling circus, party of the second part will not hold party of the first part responsible for any injuries, personal or otherwise, party of the second part may sustain while in the employ of the party of the first part, and from any cause whatever. Party of the second part further agrees that the conduct of party of second part shall be proper at all times and in conformity to all the rules and regulations of party of the first part. Party of the second part agrees to give party of the first part four weeks' notice in case party of the second part wishes to terminate engagement before termination of the regular season of 191*1* of party of the first part; and further to forfeit one week's salary in case party of the second part terminates engagement without giving said notice. Party of the first part shall hold back one week's salary of party of the second part as a guarantee of good faith. Party of the second part agrees to accept three weeks' notice from party of the first part in case party of the first part wishes to terminate this agreement prior to the termination of the period during which this contract is in effect. The party of the first part shall have the right to annul this contract at any time for cause.

The parties hereto have affixed their signature this *14<sup>th</sup>* day of *October*, 191*1*.  
at Baraboo, Wisconsin. *Al Sweet for Ringling Bros.* Party of the First Part.  
*Walter Miller* Party of the Second Part.



Christmas Greetings to all from the former winter quarters of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. The French Lick West Baden Museum houses a room-sized diorama made by Peter Gorman depicting the circus in action circa 1920. As you can see by the picture, the Side Show is set up for another performance. Museum hours are Tuesday-Saturday 10-4 and special tours can be arranged by calling [821-936-3592](tel:821-936-3592) or on line at [flwbmuseum@gmail.com](mailto:flwbmuseum@gmail.com). We hope you have a prosperous new year and will travel to visit us in downtown French Lick, IN.



**HAPPY HOLIDAYS!**

**★ COLE BROS. ★  
★ CIRCUS OF THE STARS ★**



**JOHN &  
BRIGITTE PUGH  
& THE COLE BROS. CIRCUS  
FAMILY**

**The World's Largest Circus Under The Big Top**



# HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL



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# PETE CRISTIANI REMEMBERS—PART V

## Cristiani Bros. Circus Enjoys Meteoric Rise, Finally Collapses Under Its Own Weight

By Lane Talburt

As a croupier on the notorious Dailey Bros. pie car in 1950, Pete Cristiani was well acquainted with Lady Luck. His experiences taught him that the house wins most throws of the dice. So when Pete and his family cast the die to launch Cristiani Bros. Circus in 1956, they took almost every conceivable step to game the process in their favor.

For starters, they relied on a large money pot—their combined earnings from two previous partnerships with Floyd King and Big Bob Stevens. They geared the new show to play mostly smaller towns along a familiar route in the eastern half of the U. S. and Canada which had yielded good returns in prior seasons. They dramatically reduced the nut by relying heavily on their own talent pool and by taking a less-is-more approach in sizing the Cristiani Bros. footprint.

“When we framed the show in ‘56 in Sarasota,” Cristiani recalled during a 2011 interview, “it wasn’t a big show; it wasn’t a little show. It was kind of in between.”

As events unfolded on tour, Lady Luck played a larger role in the Cristianis’ success than they ever could have ever imagined. The big tops of three major competitors—Ringling-Barnum, Clyde Beatty and King Bros.—folded during the season.

In addition, the Cristianis improved the odds for success by avoiding a late-season billing war with the revived Beatty show over former Ringling turf in the Southland. Instead of confrontation, Pete and his brothers chose collusion with two old chums who were now operating the Beatty tome—Frank McClosky and Walter Kernan. This narrowed the Cristianis’ principal opposition to two circuses: Mills Bros. and Hunt Bros. Day-and-date competition with those shows could be limited by the knowledge that Mills had a well-defined route in the Midwest, and Hunt confined its travels mostly to the Northeast.

Was it any wonder, then, that the Cristiani Bros. ticket wagon was bulging with cash at the end of its maiden tour? Or that a simi-

Cristiani Bros. Circus on the lot in Lafayette, Indiana, May 6, 1956. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr. All illustrations from Pfening Archives.

larly productive 1957 season enabled the family to vastly expand their enterprise in 1958 into what they billed as the “world’s largest” and “America’s greatest tented show?”

But fickle fate ultimately turned against the Cristianis. A series of accidents, overextension of their resources and some questionable management decisions brought the family to its knees in the waning weeks of the 1959 circuit. The Cristiani Bros. title was moth-balled at the end of the 1960 season, not to be resurrected as a major touring circus.

But in the five-year period of 1956 through 1960, Ernesto and Emma Cristiani’s 10 children held sway as both performers and owners like no circus family either before or since. This segment covers those euphoric and traumatic years.

### Back Into Tent Business

Since migrating from Europe in 1934, the Italian troupe had skyrocketed into the upper echelons of American circusdom with center-ring equestrian and tumbling routines on Ringling-Barnum, Hagenbeck-Wallace, Al G. Barnes, Russell Bros-Pan Pacific, and Cole Bros. Under the leadership of Lucio Cristiani—perhaps the most talented acrobatic performer of the modern circus, the family took on dual roles as kinkers and owners in successive partnerships with Floyd King and Big Bob Stevens before opting to go solo in 1956.

Having endured the rigors of sandstorms, pelting rain and unrelenting sunbaths during the 1954 and 1955 tours, family members were more than ready to once again put a big top over their diversified routines.

“We wanted to get back into the tent business,” Pete said. “We were more successful there.”

But the notion of returning to the rails, which Lucio had strongly promoted before the family’s split with Floyd King at the end of the 1953 season, was no longer in play.

After the close of the Bailey Bros.-Cristiani epoch at Peoria, Illinois in mid-November 1955, the Cristianis returned to their home base in Sarasota with their small fleet of trucks to build the new







Cristiani big top canvas spool truck built by Wayne Sanguin at his shop in Hugo, Oklahoma over the winter of 1955-1956. Photo taken during its first year of use. Photo by George Piercy.

enterprise. They found the 20-acre plot on Gocio Road, owned by Daviso, well suited for that purpose.

The family had intended to premiere their three-ringer in South Florida in early February 1956, but "some of the dates were crossed off because of opposition with Benson Bros.," the *Billboard* reported on February 26.

Shifting to a mid-March opening date also gave the Cristiani more time to assemble the myriad pieces of the show from scratch, including new canvas for the big top and a combined side show-menagerie. Lucio Cristiani spent over \$100,000 on new equipment and animals, according to *Billboard's* April 14 issue. The top, supplied by U. S. Tent and Awning, was erected for the first time at winter quarters on February 28 in observance of the 116th anniversary of the founding of the Cristiani circus in Pisa, Italy, in 1840. At 110 feet wide—with two 40s and a 50-foot middle, the big top was 20 feet narrower than the former King Bros-Cristiani canvas. Featuring all-white canvas, the big top was supported by four aluminum center poles and one line of quarter poles. It seated about 2,300, again less than the King-Cristiani top.

"We just figured with that size tent we could play smaller towns. We had our choice of more territory," Pete Cristiani explained.

This conservative approach to launching a new show placed Cristiani Bros. somewhere in the middle of the pack—smaller than Ringling-Barnum, Clyde Beatty and Mills Bros., but larger than the two-unit King circus and its other competitor in the Northeast, Hunt Bros.

Prior to the start of the 1956 season, *Billboard* touted the Beatty outfit as the one most likely to give Ringling-Barnum a run for the money in the South. "The two railroaders, Ringling-Barnum and

Canton, Ohio, businessman Tony Diano had his exotic animals on Cristiani in 1956. Shown here is the rhino trailer. Photo by George Piercy.



Beatty, have crossed several times but not necessarily by intent," the circus Bible reported on March 10. "Beatty's planned moves will bring him into the Southland territory ahead of the fair season and thus give the show first crack at which is hoped will be lush territory. . . . Beatty is also intimately knowledgeable about Ringling habits, since it contains two top ex-Ringling people, Frank McClosky with concessions and Bob Reynolds as superintendent."

McClosky and Reynolds, along with two other Ringling exes—Walter Kernan and Willis Lawson, had chartered Atlas Concession Corporation to take over concessions on the Beatty show in early 1956 and later outmaneuvered their former boss Art Concello to win control of the famous wild animal trainer's circus.

### Family Sets Sights on Canada

The Cristiani formed two corporations for their outfit, as explained in the April 21 *Billboard*. Chartered in Macon, Georgia,

the American Circus Company operated the Cristiani Bros. Circus with Lucio, Oscar and Mogador (Paul) Cristiani listed as officers and with capitalization of \$5,000. A separate entity, the Palm Circus Equipment Corporation, was chartered with a minimum capitalization of \$100,000 was to be responsible for "buying, selling and renting circus and show property of all kinds." Applicants for this charter were Bel-



One of Pete's concession stands on the Cristiani midway in Fort Meyers, Florida on March 26, 1957. Note lemonade dispenser on left. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

monte and Daviso and the clan's patriarch Ernesto (Papa) Cristiani.

On the eve of the Cristiani Bros.' March 12-13 opening stand at West Palm Beach, Florida, Lucio told *Billboard* (March 24) that "the new show is to enter Canada early in July. He said the show is contracted solidly for two months in the Dominion. Show, he said, will go as far west as Indiana."

A week later the trade journal listed the physical equipment as "22 trucks back plus two ahead. . . . General admission is \$1.25 and inside tickets are \$1.25. . . . Side show has three-pole top, eight double banners and a five-man band. It contains the 10 elephants (Oscar Cristiani's five plus the Norma Davenport Cristiani quintet) and cages, with Kodiak bear, sun bears, alligator and monkeys. Platform acts are Punch, snakes, sword box and fire eater. Tickets are 50 cents."

Sideshow managers Tommy Hart and Charlie Roark had come over to the new Cristiani show from King Bros. "We knew Floyd King was going under because a number of billposters and phone promoters were leaving his show and coming to us. They wanted out of there," Pete commented.

Pete also welcomed the return of a number of butchers who had worked for him on the old King-Cristiani show. Having been limited in the size of concession operations during the two previous outdoor seasons, Cristiani now employed up to 20 butchers on the midway and under the big top. He spruced up his stands with new canvas and plastic. Many concessionaires also drove show rigs at night to the next town.



### No Surprise, Cristianis Featured

In keeping with the name on the marquee, the Cristianis dominated the performance. Six siblings made multiple appearances. Lucio, as always, was the star in both the family riding act and tumbling routines. He also garnered the spotlight in a comedic turn, walking—not leaping—over elephants. Belmonte also was a featured rider and leaper. Daviso was brilliant in ménage, and Corky—youngest of the four sisters—took the spotlight as a bareback rider. Oscar, eldest of the 10, worked separate routines with horses and his elephants. Ortans Cristiani and her husband Freddie Canestrelli entertained with several ground acts, especially their trademark head-to-head rola bola trick.

Two of the four Cristiani sisters—Chita and Cosetta—were not on the show during its first two seasons. They were off to Europe for two years, appearing in nightclubs and circuses with their husbands, Ramo and Tripoli, along with cousin Benny Cristiani-Zerbini. This troupe was known within the circus world as the “little Cristianis.”

Pete and Paul were the two non-performing Cristiani siblings on the tour, the latter being responsible for the advance. Papa Cristiani, though retired from the ring, held down the all-important front door while Mama Cristiani ruled over the family's mealtimes.

The traditional closing act, the human cannonball, was provided by Manuel Zacchini but it was mostly by his daughter, Flora Zacchini, who was shot across the tent into a net. Sole wild-animal act was presented by Barbara Fairchild, whose show-owned caged bears routine was held over from Cristianis-Bailey.

Although the Cristianis frequently publicized that 35 of their number were with the show, the actual count on tour varied greatly. For example, Daviso's wife Louise had not performed since suffering a career-ending fall during her single trap routine in 1951. She remained in Sarasota to manage the couple's growing real estate investments. Two of their children, Antoinette and Rio, joined the traveling band in 1956. (An embittered Louise later would throw a wrench into the family's plans to maintain their winter quarters in Sarasota.) Oscar's wife Marion, and Pete's wife Norma brought their school-aged children on tour in the summer.

But all the Cristianis who provided services either as performers or support personnel received salaries, Pete Cristiani pointed out. For example, June Cristiani, Lucio's wife at the time, was on the payroll for taking tickets under the big top marquee. And Norma Cristiani drew pay when she was helping Pete with concessions—in between her duties raising three children, Tony, Eva Dee and Desi—or making an occasional appearance in the ring to present her five elephants or as a web girl.

(During an interview two years before her death in 2010, Norma said her father once chastised her for remaining in the trailer to take care of her young brood. “You need to hire a babysitter,” Ben Davenport told his circus-reared daughter. “Get out there and make some money!” Which she promptly did, Norma laughed.)

### Trouping on, Despite Mishaps

The normal run of accidents and illnesses resulted in a slew of substitutions and omissions in the performing roster. The cannon act was scrubbed from the night show at Lafayette, Indiana, on May 4, after both of the Zacchinis were hurt. And Lucio Cristiani was absent from there while recovering from a neck injury he incurred several days earlier, reported the *Billboard* on May 19.

Even with its premiere acts out of the line-up, the circus still garnered a rave review: “In both performance and equipment, the show is strong. . . . This is a clean circus. It is a show with canvas that is fresh and bright despite spring mud. . . . Motor equipment throughout the show is in excellent condition and includes numerous new rigs. All of it is well painted and scrolled in circus style.”

Cristiani Bros. suffered its only weather-related accident on June 1 in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. When a fast-moving storm hit the midway just prior to the start of the matinee, “the Side Show and Menagerie, housing [Tony] Diano's animals, lifted and collapsed

with about 50 people and the Circus Folk under it,” reported circus fan George Brinton Beal in the May-June edition of *White Tops*.

“They were brought out almost before the canvas touched the ground. That only 12 were injured, none seriously, was a miracle.” Circus worker John Hitit was hospitalized for treatment of a possible cracked skull and broken arm after being hit by a falling pole as he was dropping the sideshow banner line. A veteran animal handler, Dusty Greer, was able to lead the Diano giraffe back into its tall wire enclosure just before the strong wind gusts blew the kid top down.

Cristiani Bros. suffered a more personal loss at Fitchburg. Legal adjuster Ralph Clawson was stricken with a heart attack while the show was in Fitchburg and died there several days later. Clawson's widow Rose remarried in 1957 to Robert Brown, the Cristiani office wagon manager.

Pete Cristiani said he could recall only one other storm-caused mishap over the five-years span of the family's circus, when winds shredded one round end of the big top at Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1959. The tent was empty at the time and the damaged portion was replaced days later. Pete credited the constant vigilance of his brother Belmonte, the show superintendent, for avoiding similar weather-related mishaps involving the big top canvas.

### Succeeding in Rivals' Wake

Sunny skies and balmy temperatures greeted the Cristianis when they pitched their new tent to start the 1956 season in West Palm Beach. Barbara Fairchild noted in the *Billboard's* “Under the Marquee” column of March 31 that “the first performance went smoothly without rehearsal.”

After playing to full houses during the two-day Shrine-sponsored stand, the Cristianis did similar business in Key West before moving up Florida and into Georgia to continued good business. They encountered little resistance in the Peach state from the two



Guying out the Cristianis big top on a wet lot at Fort Meyers, Florida on March 26, 1957. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.





Belmonte Cristiani, shown here in 1958, was the General Superintendent of his family's circus. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

separate units of King Bros. piloted respectively by the sparring Floyd King and Arnold Maley. The King partners, who ended the 1955 season at odds over their faltering enterprise, staged simultaneous openings on April 7—Floyd King's opera in Macon and Maley's in Thomaston.

Experiencing poor turnouts, Maley's Western unit played Aniston, Alabama, on April 11, just a day after the new Cristiani show. Floyd King's

Eastern unit was battered by winds at Macon and smacked by both wind and rain at Elberton, Georgia, on April 10. As a result of getting mired in the mud, the King troupers were unable to make a two-show stand the next day at Winder. On May 18 creditors filed a petition to force King Bros. into involuntary bankruptcy. On June 5 Maley, acting under court orders, assumed control of the beleaguered Eastern unit, thus reducing his more experienced partner to employee status. The re-combined circus gave up the ghost after giving two performances at Middletown, Connecticut, on June 13.

Clyde Beatty fared no better on the West Coast. Following a mid-March opener at winter quarters in Deming, New Mexico, the 15-car rail circus moved swiftly into the traditionally lucrative Los Angeles market. A combination of rainy weather and lackluster turnouts plagued the famous wild-animal trainer throughout Southern California, causing the owner to fall behind in meeting his hefty weekly payroll. The union representing performers prevented the Beatty ringmaster from blowing his opening whistle for the matinee show at Oxnard on May 9. Two days later the Beatty train, minus several dozen stranded kinkers, made its way back to quarters in Southwestern New Mexico. To the scars on his body from unexpected lion and tiger attacks, the veteran showman added the stain of bankruptcy.

Ringling-Barnum brought a dose of reality to the old circus superstition that bad news arrives in threes. On July 16 John Ringling North pulled the plug on the Big One's under-canvas touring days at Pittsburgh. The four-section train returned to Sarasota, where North and Art Concello—the latter having been thwarted in his attempt to seize control of the Beatty show in which he owned a large stake—began plotting a tent-less future for the Greatest Show on Earth. McClosky and Kernan, who won the turf battle, immediately hired Floyd King away from the Big One to route the rejuvenated Beatty show into the South. Maley also landed on his feet, joining his former rivals, the Cristianis, at a later date.

Cristiani Bros., having emerged from a prosperous two-month tour of the Canadian Maritime provinces, was playing a one-day, Shrine-sponsored engagement at Malone, New York, when John Ringling North declared the era of the tented circus was at an end. The former center-ring equestrian stars on Ringling-Barnum continued to prove just how wrong North was. "At the same time," reported *Billboard* on

August 11, "the Cristianis say they became the nation's number one circus with the end of the Ringling show. Lucio Cristiani is quoted as saying the show is having its very best season and a solid route through October."

On September 15, under the headline "North words help—business doing great for several circuses," *Billboard* added, wryly: "Among the current big crowds at circuses are a number of people who say they have come because they want their children to be sure they see a circus 'and this may be their last chance.' While disputing any idea that the business is in danger, most showmen have been ready to accommodate those who want to buy tickets on this now-or-never basis."

### Cristiani, Beatty Avoid Clashes

General agent Paul Cristiani adjusted his family's route to take advantage of cities and towns temporarily abandoned by Big Bertha. And Pete took steps to dramatically reduce the risk of bumping into the Beatty aggregation, which remained a larger and potentially more dangerous rival with the addition of key acts and management personnel from the idled Ringling outfit.

"Frank McClosky, Walter Kernan and I were pretty good friends," explained Pete, who had remained close to McClosky since 1945, when the later was a manager on the Pan Pacific-Russell show headlined by the Cristianis. Pete, who in 1949 had acquired surplus Ringling equipment from McClosky to help rebuild the King show, said he and the new Beatty General Manager chatted by phone "two or three times a week" during the 1956 season.

"McClosky didn't want to bother the competition," Cristiani continued. "Floyd King didn't care if he butted heads, but McClosky didn't want to hear that crap. He controlled Floyd pretty well. I don't think in the five years that we were on the East Coast [that] we bucked each other six times. Of course, we couldn't avoid competition in some towns."

Though there was no day-and-date competition between the two shows in 1956, the Cristianis' truck outfit did beat the McClosky-led Beatty circus into Greenwood and Yazoo City, Mississippi.

There was plenty of good business to be had, however, and both shows took full advantage of the opportunities. For example, "the Cristianis Bros. Circus played [Columbus, Mississippi, on October

Cristiani midway on a big matinee at Columbus, Ohio, June 14 or 15, 1958. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.







Vickie Cristiani, daughter of Oscar and Marion Cristiani, on the lot during the 1958 tour. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

3] and scored a pair of three-quarter houses. The business was considered even more unusual because it was achieved in cloudy and rainy weather," *Billboard* noted on October 20.

The family had intended to close the season in their hometown in a rare Sunday stand on October 21, but had to circle back to pick up an engagement at Leesburg, Florida, on October 22, that had been lost due to a hurricane on October 15.

Overall, Cristiani vehicles chewed up almost 14,500 miles dur-

Cristiani side show in Columbus, Ohio, June 14 and 15, 1958, Charles Roark manager. Photo by Don Smith.



ing the 1956 tour, compared to some 21,000 miles in the family's last year of mostly open-air performances with Big Bob Stevens on Bailey-Cristiani.

The Beatty show, whose season had been interrupted from May 9 until August 30 by bankruptcy and reorganization, was the last of the major circuses to end the season—on November 20 at the dog track in Sarasota owned by the show's lead partner, Jerry Collins. But Sarasota city and county officials could not be cajoled into allowing the Beatty enterprise into set up its own winter quarters there. Instead, the last remaining rail show of the 1956 season latched onto the fairgrounds in DeLand, Florida, as its "temporary" wintering spot. The Cristiani and Ringling outfits would later be driven out of "America's Circus City" as well.

Pete Cristiani made a return visit to Havana, Cuba, in December with his wife and the Norma Davenport Cristiani elephants, presented by Rex and Barbara Williams at the King of American Circuses in the Sports Palace. It was there in late 1955 that an exiled American Mafioso took an interest in the elephants—and Pete who became a frequent guest at a nearby casino managed by Dino Cellini. Fifteen years later Cellini would recommend Pete to the president of Circus-Circus Casino in Las Vegas to succeed the late circus producer Al Dobritch as entertainment director at the mob-connected resort. In its January 12, 1957, issue *Billboard* cited "political unrest in the country" as a major factor in holding down attendance at the four circuses running concurrently in Havana. The Sports Palace's European-style show—with Pat Anthony's cage act as the main attraction—was the largest. The Tom Packs-produced offering pulled out of the doldrums to close an extended engagement with a series of full houses.

Pete and Norma's quintet had spent most of the previous season on various Tom Packs sponsored dates after being replaced on the Cristiani Bros. tour by Tony Diano's elephants. In 1957, however, the Canton, Ohio, exotic animal fancier decided to place his bulls, giraffe and rhino on the World of Mirth Shows. "The animal show was on the carnival two seasons ago and earlier," pointed out an April 27 *Billboard* article.

#### Steering Around Rivals

Seen within a larger context of the Cristiani's overall scope of operations, the size and makeup of the combined side show and menagerie was the least of concerns. The family once again had to pay attention to the revived Ringling-Barnum. Nor could the family claim their show to be Number One among domestic circuses.

Even though the Big One had mothballed its train in favor of trucks and four leased rail cars, Tom Parkinson's April 13 *Billboard* review left little doubt about the show's muscle: "NEW YORK—A new Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus got underway here (April 3) at Madison Square Garden. Make no mistake: it's still the Greatest Show on Earth."

With the return of several acts that had migrated to the Beatty show after the Big One folded in Pittsburgh the previous July, the North-Concello operation played a combination of indoor arenas and ballparks, leaving its smaller rivals the daily task—and associated expense—of erecting and tearing down the big top.

The Beatty outfit also converted to trucks in early 1957, leaving America without a single, full-fledged railroad circus for the first time in eons. It now assumed bragging rights as the largest tented circus. Cristiani Bros. remained a mid-size show with the same big top,





The Cristianis show believed in advance advertising. The work of Elmer Kauffman's billposting crew is shown in this nice spread of wall work in the Chicago area in 1958. Photo by Don Smith.

but increased the capacity to about 3,000 by adding 500 seats in the blues. Beatty's more expansive canvas was touted to hold up to 4,500 spectators.

Floyd King's routing of the McClosky-Kernan epic into the same Canadian provinces that the Cristianis covered in 1956—minus any competition from the latter—surprised no one on the Lucio Cristianis-managed show. Following the same practice of the previous season, *Billboard* of March 30 noted: "Paul Cristianis . . . said he and Floyd King, agent for Clyde Beatty, have been conferring about general routing plans. Although they will be playing the same territory, only in a few towns will the two shows be in direct connection. . . . He said they believed the second show into a town would not do as well as the first and that there were enough good stands for each of them to be first in most cases."

Cristiani Bros. dropped Canada from its routing schemes for the next four seasons (though the "little Cristianis" did return to the Dominion with under the leased King Bros. title in 1959). "Phone promotions weren't as good in Canada; they just didn't respond as well there as they did down here," Pete explained. "My brother Paul couldn't get the promoters to go back up there." Equally compelling, he reasoned, the family's circus could continue to draw good business from Eastern U.S. communities without the hassle of long jumps and rough roads north of the border.

Pete disclosed that King pitched his services to handle the advance for the Cristianis at the start of the 1957 and 1958 seasons. Pete said Walter Kernan had told him that McClosky "was only paying Floyd King \$300 a week—that's all McClosky wanted to pay him" from the time King signed on with the Beatty show in mid-1956. Cristianis also recalled that King later approached him in 1962 to take on routing for the 1963 tour of one of Pete's circuses. In each of these instances, the Cristianis rebuffed their ex-partner primarily because "we didn't have room for him" on the show.

The Cristianis also were able to limit head-to-head competition with Mills Bros. Pete said he and his brothers talked regularly with

Jack Mills, who was "easy to deal with."

"They were booked farther ahead than any other show. They repeated much of their route. Jack used to tell us where they were going to be because he was already booked a year ahead."

In addition, Pete said, Mills Bros. was "an easier show to be around [i.e., in neighboring communities] because they didn't put up much paper. They used window cards and some radio advertising."

Another reason not to buck the Ohio-based three-ringer on its well-defined turf was the impressive list of loyal sponsors to whom Mills Bros. gave a financial guarantee each season and who in turn gave the circus phone salesmen unlimited access to local organizations and residents. "Jack Mills had the best promotions crews in the business," Pete averred, which meant that any competitor who attempted a head-to-head confrontation or an end-around would find leftovers mighty lean.

#### Tented, Indoor Shows Thrive

Nor did the Cristianis experience any conflicts with another growing presence in the tent world, Kelly-Miller, which brought an ex-cowboy movie star back into the ring for the first time since the 1938 failure of his own Col. Tim McCoy's Real Wild West Show, a medium-size railer. McCoy, the first big name to be featured on Obert Miller's Oklahoma outfit, made one appearance in the big show to promote the concert, which he stocked mostly with his own personnel. Kelly-Miller was easily the king of the high-grass shows, heavily promoting its large menagerie and its white fleet of Chevrolet trucks in newspapers and circulars.

*Billboard's* 1957 Outdoor Amusement Directory listed 18 tent circuses, including Cristianis, Beatty, Mills, Kelly-Miller, Garden Bros. (Canada only), Hunt Bros., Hagen Bros. and Von Bros. Ten circuses were classified as indoor shows, including Clyde Bros. (fielded by Howard Suesz, who also had the tented Hagen show), Gil Gray, Hamid-Morton, Polack Eastern and Western units and, for the first time, Ringling-Barnum. Ben Davenport's Dailey Bros., now setting up as a two-semitrailer, walk-through street attraction, was counted as one of six "open air" circuses. Larger shows assigned to this category included Tom Packs' Eastern and Western units and Rudy Bros. Fourteen circuses were lumped into the "oth-





Cristiani four-pole big top shortly before being raised on the morning of June 27 for big stand in Chicago. Photo by C. P. Fox.

er" slot, including the James M. Cole offering, Diano's Menagerie, Gainesville Community Circus and Frank Wirth's show. And last, "five carnivals that either added circus to titles or featured free acts in advertising" made the show biz journal's roster.

Tom Parkinson saw a continuation of good fortune for the business in general. "Last season was highly profitable for many shows. . . . Early dates by indoor shows this season have drawn unusually strong attendance, and there would seem to be every reason to expect another profitable year in the circus business."

The Beatty show opened March 17 at the DeLand Armory, then headed for Charleston, South Carolina, on a reported 27 trucks. Some of its trailers had been converted from rail to highway use. Three circuses opened their seasons in Oklahoma during April—Hagen Bros. in Pauls Valley on the 18th, Carson & Barnes, previously the Tex Carson Circus and now co-owned by Jack Moore and D. R. Miller, at Atoka; also on the 18th; and Kelly-Miller at Durant

The Cristiani Circus engagement on Chicago's Lake Front from June 27 to July 13 was a huge money maker for the show. The matinee crowd is shown leaving the big top. Photo by Herbert Georg.



on April 29. Mills Bros. took the wraps off its 18th season at Jefferson, Ohio, on April 20. The later show was out only four months, playing its last date on August 19 at Levittown, Pennsylvania.

#### Cristiani Kick Off 1957 Tour

The Cristiani family bolstered their cash position by opening the 1957 season in the affluent South Florida market. To reach that money pot required a 346-mile jump from winter quarters to the southern-most city in the U.S., Key West, for a March 22-23 debut. Then, capping off its nine-day warm-up in West Palm Beach, the show made an even longer jump—385 miles—to Jessup, Georgia, for two performances on April Fool's Day.

Three days later the threat of a tornado caused a cancellation at Thomaston, Georgia. "The decision was made three hours before the matinee was scheduled," explained *Billboard* on April 13. "The show picked up and headed for Griffin. No rain fell prior to the decision but dark, swirling clouds made serious threats."

This lost opportunity was all but forgotten by the time the Cristiani reached their old stomping fairgrounds in Macon for two shows on Saturday, April 13. "Lucio Cristiani, manager, said business so far has exceeded expectations," *Billboard* reported on April 17. "On the lot to greet him was his former partner, Floyd King, general agent of the Clyde Beatty Circus, who has a home here. Arnold Maley, who was a partner with King in the King-Maley circus, joined the Cristiani show as secretary three days before the local date and was on hand to greet local friends. . . .

"Pete Cristiani, who handles concessions, has a new stainless steel diner, managed by Al Dennis. The concession tops are special yellow, blue and red striped tents made for the show by U. S. Tent and Awning Company."

Among newcomers to the big-top troupe were unicyclist Mario Rojas and Jorgen Christiansen, whose mixed animal liberty act—the Story Book Animal Revue (a Palomino horse, two guanacos, a goat, collie dog and a Norwegian elk hound)—had become a show-owned routine during the off-season. Returnees included Harry Dann, a clown who had become ringmaster on the departure of Milt Robbins, and bandleader A. Lee Hinckley, who replaced Phil Doto during the previous season.

The size of the Cristiani fleet varied, depending to who was counting at any given stop. Just prior to the start of the 1957 tour, Lucio Cristiani told the *Sarasota Journal* on March 7 that the show





The well-known clown Emmett Kelly joined the show for dates in Philadelphia and Chicago in 1958. He is shown here enjoying a cigarette in the back yard in the latter city. Photo by Don Smith.

would roll out on 35 trucks, with six trucks having been added over the winter.

Circus historian Joseph Bradbury recalled that when he visited Cristiani the show "traveled on 24 vehicles, including eleven semis. There were 10 elephants and the same 110 with three 40s big top used the previous season," in a pamphlet accompanying a 1993 video released by the Circus Fans Association's Dugan Bros.-Arnold Maley Tent 116.

During one of its Pennsylvania stops on May 28, Lucio told the *Reading Eagle* that the show's 150-plus employees "traveled in 23 tractor-trailers, plus innumerable house-trailers. . . ."

And the *Billboard* correspondent's count in the August 19 issue included 32 pieces of rolling stock, as follows: "Nine trucks for elephants, horses and other stock . . . 3 for seats, 3 sleepers, 3 cages, 2 for light plants, 2 panel trucks and 1 each for band, wardrobe, chairs-sleeper, concessions, side show, canvas spool, sound truck, clown props, office advertising paper and cookhouse." Not included in this census was the Zacchini cannon truck.

The same story disclosed that "plans for Cristiani Bros. Circus new equipment, including a larger big top and five seat wagons, are paved with intentions to play some indoor sellout dates this winter.

"Meanwhile, the show continues its strong showing in the East. Long Island dates have panned out exceptionally well for this show. . . . Clyde Beatty Circus played the island this spring and did well. . . ."

In upstate New York, Ringling-Barnum was experiencing some of the same weather-related setbacks as the Cristianis did with their outdoor show of 1954-1955. "A three-day, six-show stand by RBBB Circus in MacArthur Stadium [in Syracuse] was a loser," reported *Billboard* on August 19. "Show was up against rain or threat of rain at four of the performances." Best crowd in the 9,000-seat stadium for the August 9-11 stand was 2,317 on opening night. The local sponsor estimated the circus loss at \$18,000 and stated he hoped to book Ringling-Barnum into a Syracuse indoor arena on its next visit. The Big One would benefit from an increasing number of indoor facilities being built around the nation.

#### Cops Stake Out Elephants

The Cristianis' money-making opera was not without its problems either, although they were usually fixed with minimal disruption and expense. During a Sunday jump from Long Island to Lodi, New Jersey, police arrested four elephant truck drivers as they entered the Garden State from Manhattan. Citing an Associated Press dispatch, the *Sarasota Journal* on August 19 reported that "the four Cristianis men—William Clough of Troy, N.Y., and Robert Ritchie, Angelo Antico and Robert Mitchell, all of Sarasota, were herding

the pachyderms across the George Washington Bridge when the police got into the act.

"Police said, according to the [wire service], that the truck drivers didn't have licenses to drive, with or without elephants. . . ."

"Drivers and cargo were in custody of the Ft. Lee, N.J., police late last night, with the latter group shackled and staked out around the police station.

"The circus notified police [that] other drivers would be sent to transport the elephants to the next show—this time with licenses."

After completing a successful Northeastern circuit with two New Jersey stands, Cristiani Bros. quickly moved into familiar towns in West Virginia and Virginia, and then plunged into the Deep South for its final, two-month swing.

Floyd King and Frank McClosky showed their displeasure at having to eat the Cristianis' dust, first in Connecticut and later in Alabama, by skipping over several towns to confront their Florida neighbors in Pensacola. As a result, the two competitors overlapped on Sunday, September 15. Still, the Cristianis show got there first, playing on Saturday and Sunday, while the Beatty outfit staged Sunday-Monday performances.

The Cristianis circus ran into a spate of problems in the Carolinas. At Hamet, North Carolina, on October 19, a flu epidemic sweeping the South held attendance to half houses. Stay-aways at other towns resulted in relatively poor business. The show had an uptick in business in Georgia, but the final Florida yields were sparse.

A 51-mile home run on November 3 from a two-day stand at Tampa completed the overall bountiful 1957 season in which the Cristianis traveled 13,127 miles, all of them in communities east of the Mississippi. Clyde Beatty and company stayed out two more weeks, closing at St. Petersburg on November 17. The Beatty tour covered slightly more miles—13,184—while journeying as far north as Cape Breton Island in Canada and as far west as Carlsbad, New Mexico.

As a signal of its growing national presence, the Cristianis family's enterprise was the subject of a major piece in the September 17 *Saturday Evening Post* under the heading "Don't Tell Them the Circus Is Dead." Writer John Kobler, who had followed the circus with a photographer for several months, got right to the Cristianis' pushback against John Ringling North's premature benediction of the previous season. "'The circus finito!' exclaimed Ernesto, the tiny, twinkling, seventy-five-year-old patriarch of the clan. 'Next t'ing you gonna tell me, ice cream she's-a-finish too.'"

#### Evoking Tradition, Shunning Glitz

Lucio was quoted as saying, "John Ringling North went over people's heads. Dancing girls, Broadway trimmings and Broadway prices—it couldn't work."

Glamorous trappings were not the lure of the newer show, Kobler wrote. "Stripped down to the classic ingredients of clowning and daredevilry, the Cristianis circus eschews chorines, balletic extravaganzas, fancy lighting effects and air conditioning. It prints no programs. The top price ranges between one dollar and one dollar and a quarter. . . . The seats, the combined sideshow-menagerie and the 'candy stands' . . . are kept spic and span as a Dutch kitchen."

The article extolled the family's size and diversity in all aspects of operating a circus as a major contributor to the bottom line.

But in preparing for the 1958 tour, the Cristianis threw caution to the wind in their determination to pin down bragging rights as the biggest and best show under the big top. This would be the family's finest hour. It would mark the final season in which all 10 siblings would appear together under the Cristianis title, with sisters Chita and Cosetta and the Cristianis-Zerbini troupe returning



for duty. For fans of the traditional American circus, this became the show to follow.

In order to avoid the 300-plus-mile roundtrip jumps that book-ended the spring opening in 1957, the Cristianis elected instead to schedule a winter tour of South Florida from January 14 to 28. Sponsored dates took the show for one-day stands at Punta Gordo, Fort Myers, Naples, Homestead, Key West, Marathon, Perrine, Pompano Beach, West Hollywood, Ojus, South Miami and Sweetwater.

According to *Billboard* on February 10, the Cristianis' "recent 13-day tour of Florida turned in a profit of \$24,700, amazingly profitable and yet less than it might have been if weather had not turned out cold."

The extra cash would come in handy since the same article pointed out that in the midst of the nation's economy recovering from a recession, the circus was "developing plans that would make it the biggest under-canvas circus. They are spending an estimated \$150,000 in preparation for a new tour and to that is added the Diano Menagerie and other features that are being booked. . . . Already on order is a 140-foot big top with three 50-foot middles. . . . Six new truck tractors are being purchased. The show will move on a projected 38 show-owned units, plus other trucks that will put the fleet near 50 units, it was reported." Though the Cristiani fleet would be considerably larger than before, it still fell short of the approximately 70-truck show fielded by the now-defunct King Bros. Circus several years earlier. Nonetheless, the dramatically larger Cristiani complement of rolling stock portended an abundance of vehicle maintenance problems, which would directly impact the show's ability to consistently assemble all units necessary for raising the show and putting on a quality performance at various locations.

#### Contending in Metro Areas

With a circus of this magnitude, the Cristianis would need to tap into larger metropolitan areas offering at least the potential for greater profits. They succeeded beyond their wildest dreams as they contracted, first, the week-long Memorial Day stand at Philadelphia, then the Chicago Lakefront lot. With engagements of these lengths, which they had not seen since their halcyon days of Ringling-Barnum a quarter of a century earlier, Cristiani Bros. could easily attract the top talent on tour. And it did.

*Billboard's* April 21 coverage of the new season pointed out the importance of tapping into the urban markets. "Draw circles around the six or eight principal metropolitan markets on a map of the United States and you have indicated some of the primary territory for circuses. For the Big Tops have moved to the suburbs. . . ."

Cristiani Bros. routing figured prominently in four of the cited markets—New York, Baltimore, Washington and Philadelphia. It also was booked for the first time into Chicago, Milwaukee and Columbus, which promised greater returns from the Midwest. They also would venture briefly back and forth from Illinois over the Mississippi into Davenport and Burlington, Iowa. Still to be accomplished—a year later—was a westward trek over the Rockies and into the sprawling Southern California network of cities.

But Ringling-Barnum and the Beatty shows were not sitting by idly as the Cristiani family encroached on their turf. The North-Concello duo surprised many by scheduling the Big One's opening date on March 18 not at the all-too-predictable Madison Square Garden, but in a new arena at Charlotte, North Carolina. And the McClosky and Kernan-managed Clyde Beatty Circus was challenging Ringling by opening April 4 at New Jersey's Palisades Park just across the Hudson from the Garden.

Elsewhere, Mills Bros. started its 1958 season at winter quarters on April 19; Kelly-Miller chose Paris, Texas, for its debut, and Carson & Barnes opened on April 5 at Casa Grande, Arizona, where it had halted operations at the end of 1957.



Thirty-three year old Pete Cristiani in 1958. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

The Cristianis would have preferred better weather to show off their new tents and beefed up performance at Valdosta, Georgia, on April 14—a 282-mile leap from their Sarasota quarters. After battling wind and rain at its first two stops, the mammoth circus pulled into Macon for midweek matinee and evening performances on April 16.

Try to picture the impact that this circus made on old-timers who had close ties with the Cristianis since their first winter at Macon with the King show in 1949-50.

The arrival of Carl Wyche's flying squadron during the previous day was a giveaway on the monster that was to follow overnight from Americus. Bob Parkinson, a self-styled "observer" in his July 19 report on the Cristiani rolling stock at Davenport, explained the procedure as follows: "Show has two sets of aluminum center poles, each pole

broken in center permitting transport in two sections. Stake driver goes one day ahead with one set of stakes and big top center poles putting same in place and ready to go on arrival (sic) of rest of show on show day. Semi pole truck brings stakes and center poles from last stand which are transferred to stake driver in the middle of the morning so it can go ahead to the next town. Two-section center poles permits transport on relatively short straight bed stake driver truck."

Implementation of the flying squadron allowed extra time for the parade, *Billboard* elaborated on April 21.

Another time-saving technique was the unspooling of the three 50-foot middles as one 150-piece section.

Two additional pre-performance tactics—spiffy new ads and a street parade—were flashy reminders that this wasn't the same Cristiani outfit of previous seasons. Reminiscent of the Floyd King-inspired 1953 parade on King-Cristiani, the Cristianis sent out a dozen motorized units, including Ben Davenport's steam calliope, and the ponderous pachyderms to stir up excitement downtown. Emanuel Zacchini was parade marshal.

#### Biggest Big Top of All

Setting foot on the showgrounds, the veteran circus devotee would have been immediately impressed by the physical layout, especially the "remodeled and repainted office wagon formerly used on the King show spotted in the front of the midway, with modernistic folding signs on top" as *Billboard* stated on April 21. Pete Cristiani strengthened his concessions operations in hopes of



snagging a greater haul both on the midway and under the big top, which now could seat up to 4,500 ticket-holders.

In addition to the imposing larger big top, the menagerie and sideshow had been separated, both burnishing new canvas. The menagerie top was the larger, a 70-foot round with seven 20s. Inside, circus goers got a close-up look at Tusko, nee Tommy, the Asian male elephant sold by Ben Davenport to Tony Diano, which was later renamed and lavishly promoted as King Tusk on the Ringling-Barnum show. Diano's rhino, giraffe and hippo also were back on Cristiani, along with his five elephants. The kid show tent was a 60 with three 30s. Ben Davenport, whose collection of pythons had enthralled Alaskans in the 1954 King-Cristiani epic, returned with his pit show for much of the season.

Size mattered, as a full-page Cristiani ad in the same *Billboard* flaunted under the heading "Best in the Century of Cristiani Tradition . . . Biggest Tented Circus in America.

- "—The only circus with a separate menagerie
- "—Largest collection of wild animals
- "—The only show with a street parade
- "—The only circus using a steam calliope
- "—The only circus using 3 major tents simultaneously"

Clyde Beatty Circus's much smaller ad in the same edition still proclaimed itself as "World's Largest!" And just to make sure that it stayed up with the competition, the Beatty show hired Bill English to manage its side show under its own new top.

But, if in the jargon of auto hobbyists, it's what's under the hood counts the most, then Cristiani Bros. also mounted a considerably more powerful performance under the big top, beginning with the introduction of a major wild-animal act not seen in the show's previous two seasons. Eddy Kuhn drew repeated rave notices for his mixed cage act.

The addition of the "little Cristianis" in tumbling turns and the elephant leaps, the Ray Del flying return routine and La Tosca Canestrelli's somersaults on the bounding rope gave the two-hour performance greater depth.

In its initial review of the new-and-improved Cristiani product at Macon, the *Billboard* took note of a larger elephant herd—up to 19 in some spots—in the menagerie, Chief Sugar Brown's troupe of 14 Indians in the big show and their teepees on the midway, and the antics of nine clowns, including Ron Hanon, Billy McCabe, Bill Brickell, Francesco Fornasari, R. W. Daniels and Bagonghi.

Cristiani family acts continued to be crowd pleasers, and Luis Munoz's shot out of the Zacchini cannon rounded out the performance.

The Doll family of midgets, newcomers to the side show, elevated that pre-show attraction to major status.

Obviously bursting with pride, Lucio Cristiani repeated a now-familiar theme to *Billboard*: "We do not believe the outdoor circus under canvas is on the road downhill. Our experiences in 1956 and 1957 with a much smaller tented circus convinced us there is a heavy potential for a large tent circus with outstanding, traditional circus entertainment."

### Conquering Philly, Chi-Town

His predictions proved correct, and especially in the newly-won major metro engagements. Philadelphia was a good case in point. Where Ringling-Barnum and Beatty had fared poorly during the previous two seasons at the Lighthouse lot in the City of Brotherly Love, Cristiani Bros. scored big in spite of competition from a major carnival occupying the same site.

Emmett Kelly gave the circus a boost in early media promotion and appeared constantly during performances at Philadel-

phia, and later at Chicago. Elmer Kauffman's billing crews also hit the streets early and often. "The most successful stand of any show in recent years resulted after the 7 days," declared the route book of the May 25-31 Philly engagement.

The Cristiani show's first visit to Columbus, Ohio, was accompanied by the heaviest billing there in two decades, according to the route book. The sponsoring fire department used its hoses to wash circus vehicles as they exited the muddy lot on the mid-June, two-day stand. The show's reputation—and the usual outstanding advance—enabled the Cristianis to continue their winning streak at Terre Haute on June 24, four days ahead of a Tom Packs engagement. But the next day, at Rantoul, Illinois, the Cristianis "found lot here hopelessly under water. Blew the lot and went on into Joliet, the following stand."

But all troupers were focused on the June 27 opener at Soldier Field on Chicago's prime lake front lot, which was produced by Tom Parker, former Clyde Bros. promoter.

"There was apprehension about weekdays of the run," wrote Tom Parkinson. "Weekends, it was felt, would bring some good houses, but weekdays might be light. . . . Business was huge. Full houses, many of them turnaways, were the rule. . . ."

Cristiani grossed \$220,000, comparing favorably to Ringling's last under-canvas stands on the same lot in 1954 and 1955. "When it was all over, Chicago knew it had seen a circus," Parkinson remarked. "Calliope concerts, street parades on State Street, posters and most of all the performance under the big top was true circus."

Demand for tickets forced the show to stay over an extra day for a matinee performance, on Sunday, July 13. The fleet made a dash for the Wisconsin state fairgrounds at West Allis, a Milwaukee suburb, for the opera's dates on Monday and Tuesday, July 14-15.

The downtown parade, seen by an estimated 300,000, despite "a sudden hard rain, which delayed unloading of animals trucked from the circus site," reported the *Milwaukee Journal* on Monday afternoon.

### Parade Jammed 20 Blocks

A review of Pete Cristiani's papers at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo revealed the magnitude of this four-block procession.

Cristiani Circus clown alley, 1959. Among the funsters are producing clown Billy McCabe, Jimmy Douglas, Kenny Dodd, Boghonghi and Bill Brickle. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.





Here was the running order, apparently as prepared by the sponsoring Milwaukee Junior Chamber of Commerce: "Police escort; mounted color guard; lead cars (Jaycee dignitaries, etc.); clown band float; giraffe cage; 2 bareback riders; 2 llamas; 13 elephants; girl float (performers); cannon; hippo and polar bear cage; Palomino; lion tamer truck and trailer; calliope; mix cage—monkey, hyena, etc. dancing horse (?); mixed cage—Kodiak bear; ponies; mix cage; sound wagon; rhino cage; Indians on horses."

Tusko was the lead bull, with elephant super Steve Fanning marching beside in white uniform and pith helmet. A grated downtown bridge spooked some of the elephants, as shown in a front page color photo in the Monday afternoon *Milwaukee Journal*.

"It was Milwaukee's first parade in 41 years," heralded the *Milwaukee Sentinel* on Tuesday morning, July 15. "It jammed 20 blocks of Wisconsin Ave. curbs."

The well-publicized event, plus a red-hot advance sale, generated plenty of returns for both the circus and the sponsoring Milwaukee Junior Chamber of Commerce. The rush to the ticket box was so strong that three performances were required on both days.

In Milwaukee and at the earlier Philadelphia date, circus press agents capitalized on a unique backyard angle—Mama Cristiani's passion for her native cuisine, which inevitably triggered comments about her weight.

"Mama looks as if she has eaten her own share of her Italian cooking," wrote Marilyn Gardner in the July 17 *Journal*. "Yet she moves easily about the small trailer and up and down the steps."

"The boys, they get tired of American cooking sometimes," [Mama] commented. "I make noodles myself, and they like that. And the minestrone and the macaroni con ricotta." Then, mama sighed a little. "I like to cook, but I no eat too much myself. High blood pressure. Very bad."

During an interview for the May 25 Philadelphia *Sunday Bulletin*, the family matriarch was more forthcoming with reporter Rex Polier. "Too many babies came long," Mama explains congenially as to why her career as a circus ballerina terminated when she was about 40 years old. "Yes, and I get fat, too."

One of the mainstays of the publicist's bag of tricks worked as well during the show's run in Chicago as it does today. The "dress-up-the-reporter-as-a-clown" come-on ensnared wire service journalist Bernard Gavzer, resulting in this nationwide dispatch on August 10: "CHICAGO (AP)—One afternoon recently I fulfilled a boyhood dream and ran away to join the circus. I chucked everything—work, routine rush hour crowds—and became a clown for a day."

"Behind the scenes of the Cristiani Bros. Circus—one of the biggest still under canvas—I was taken in hand by Kenneth (Tweedy) Dodd, 19, of Danville, Va., who was bitten by the circus bug at 13, and Jack (Blinky) Watson, 33, of Columbus, Ind."

"Do you want to be Neat, August or Charlie?" Tweedy asked. . . .

"I chose August, and a layer of white greasepaint was smeared over my face, ears and neck so no flesh could be seen. I decided on a red nose, red dots on my cheeks and a red lower lip."

"Blinky volunteered a pair of high-waisted, baggy trousers, and a striped cutaway. Tweedy contributed a red wig. And Billy McCabe of Johnstown, Pa., a pair of outsized shoes."

"Standing ready for the cue that starts the show, we found ourselves next to a man who looked pitifully derelict. This was the famous [Emmett] Kelly, the stumblebum in tattered derby and rags."

"Who did your makeup?" he asked.

"I told him."

"Not sure it fits your face," Kelly said. He studied me and said, "That flower in your lapel should be alive. Something about a clown should be real."

Circus folk managed to keep their wits about them in spite of muddy lots, broken truck axles, ring injuries, all the while helping the show reap generous profits at many stands.

### 1958 Tour Ends Early

After experiencing largely big business in a swing through New York's Long Island from August 6 to 23, Cristiani Bros. jumped into the South where the show's good luck turned bad. In addition to rainy weather holding down attendance at a number of locations, a series of employee injuries plagued the show. An elephant did a head-stand on a handler; young Lallie Zacchini was painfully burned about the face and eyes while testing cannon fuses, and Emanuel Zacchini suffered leg burns in a similar mishap.

Fred Pfening Jr., author of the Cristiani route book, took a good news-bad-news editorial posture in the last day-by-day posting, on Thursday, September 11, at Aiken, South Carolina: "This is it—closing day. Very light matinee, extremely heavy thunder and rain storm at 7 p.m. Nevertheless the show drew a ¾ house at night. Bad luck on the closing day. Luis Munoz, his wife and five children involved in very bad wreck 22 miles out of Aiken. Car and trailer total loss. They were on their way home to Sarasota. Seat truck also involved in wreck 5 miles from Aiken the next day. Too bad the season closed with the unfortunate accidents. This has been a truly great season for a truly great show. The wonderful success of the Cristiani Bros. Circus is due to the honest and sincere business policies practiced by this fine family. They have proven without question that the American public wants the old time circus. Nothing will hold this show down from now on."

Unfortunately, events largely beyond the Cristiani's control would put a damper on their optimism in the autumn and on into the following year.

The 1958 tour had come to an early close, even taking into account the number of days devoted to the pre-season jaunt in South Florida. The show racked up a fairly low mileage of 8,385, compared to just over 13,000 miles in 1957. In a recent interview, Pete Cristiani said the premature closure was intended to enable the brothers to take advantage of a proposed special engagement which fell through.

Pfening was unstinting in his praise of the Cristianis in reviewing the 1958 season for *Bandwagon's* November-December issue: "Easily the outstanding show this year was Cristiani Bros. . . . It is recognized that Cristiani Bros. was the most aggressive show on tour during the 1958 season and we are all looking forward to seeing the show next year."

But Pfening also pointed out that "there is considerable rivalry in the home base of Sarasota between the Cristiani and Beatty shows, particularly as to which is to be the larger show."

Sarasota millionaire Jerry Collins, the later show's major investor, announced he had bought the Cole Bros. title from the Chicago Stadium Corporation and would field the combined Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus in 1959. "A large number of foreign acts, including Pino del Oro, have been signed and will be featured," Pfening wrote.

The Beatty outfit equaled the Cristianis in concluding the 1958 season as a big winner, with Floyd King having routed the show from Northern Canada to Miami and from New York City to Albuquerque—covering the most ground of any show on tour that year, Pfening said.

Overall, he surmised in his review, "the record clearly indicates that this was without question the most successful year for the circus in a long, long time."



### Winter Quarters Squabble

But success would slip from the Cristianis grasp during the next two years.

Symbolic storm clouds actually began gathering over the Sarasota winter quarters in the fall of 1958. The first public indication that the family was experiencing internal strife appeared in the October 8 edition of the *Sarasota Journal*: "A petition by David [Daviso] Cristiani to enlarge a building at Cristiani Bros. winter quarters on Gocio Road was denied by the County Zoning Board of Appeals yesterday. Cristiani sought to include toilet facilities in the building. Temporary facilities have been used under authority of the County Health Dept. . . .

"A number of property owners, including Mrs. Daviso Cristiani, opposed the petition. Among their arguments were that the land is unsuitable for drainage. It is not large enough to allow expansion of quarters, planned facilities were not large enough to take care of the number of people and the site is across from a proposed new elementary school."

To his later regret, Daviso had registered the 20-acre winter quarters in the name of his wife, Louise, who had been managing the remainder of the couple's rental holdings in Sarasota.

"She was bad medicine to get along with," Pete told the writer in a 2011 interview. "She never did like my parents, my sisters—nobody. She was always, you know, cold-blooded. And she took out an injunction to get the show moved off her property."

"My brothers had built a real nice bar in there, and a machine shop, everything, believing that it would be permanent. We had a permit to be there. It had to be revoked to get us to move out. So somehow or another, she hired a detective, or somebody, to go around the whole neighborhood [to seek] complaints about the elephants' noise, the smell, the lions roaring."

The Cristianis floated a proposal in the November 30 *Sarasota News* for an alternative winter quarters property, which would be included in a to-be-developed "Circusland."

"Sarasota is flirting with the loss of a two and a half million dollar circus and only a suitable location is needed to once again put a circus in the 'Circus City,'" News staff writer Larry Murphy reported.

"The plans are made, the funds are assured, and Cristiani Bros. Circus wants to locate 'home' in Sarasota."

"But they haven't a suitable site."

"And in desperation they're looking elsewhere in the state for a location, even though they'd rather stay in Sarasota. . . .

"Circus manager Paul Cristiani feels that at least 40 acres would be needed to provide for the first development of the plans of the family."

A rendering of the proposed "Cristiani Bros. Circus Wonderland" showed barns for wild animals, amphitheater, ice rink, riding stables, restaurant, office building and a five-acre parking lot for 4,000 to 5,000 cars.

"Paul Cristiani said the circus had at one time considered becoming a part of the Disneyland project in California and that he had conferred several times with Roy Disney on the proposal."

But Sarasota city and county officials, who had already refused to allow the Beatty show to winter there and who were at loggerheads with the Ringling management over the future of its home base, were in no mood to entertain the Cristianis' plans.

Seemingly undaunted by the threat of losing their home turf, the family moved ahead with plans to expand the show and its 1959 route. At last, the riches of California were in their sights.

### Early Receipts Disappoint

Their first steps were inauspicious, to say the least. Expecting to use their normally profitable winter tour of South Florida to provide a cushion for the full season, Cristiani Bros. met disappointing results instead. At their first stop, Miami, from January 8 through 18, the circus "drew a good promotion but very poor gate, and the show turned out to be a loser," *Billboard* revealed on February 2. "Collections on promotion were reported off. Of Cristiani's \$40,000 advance sale, about \$30,000 has been collected, and there is question about whether the remaining \$10,000 will come in. . . . The Cristiani date (previously under Shrine auspices in west Palm Beach) was sponsored by a television personality, Jim Dooley, who also had a midway with independent ride operators and a display of mobile homes on the lot. Ringling wait paper was reported in the area."

Newspaper advertising promoted a street parade in Miami. In addition to the Cristiani family acts, "Pat Anthony and his jungle killers and America's #1 clown Emmett Kelly" were the featured acts. Jack Joyce's camels also performed. The latter three acts were not a part of the regular season line-up, and Kelly had already signed to appear with the Beatty-Cole show at its Palisades Park opening.

(Equestrian director-announcer Harry Dann received a total of \$200, plus "cookhouse and sleeping accommodations," for the entire 13-day run, according to an AGVA document in Pete Cristiani's papers. Wilson Storey was Dann's agent.)

Following three more single stands in South Florida, the Cristianis returned to Sarasota to concentrate on massive rebuilding. Right off the bat, two principal elements of the 1958 tour were missing—three of the four talented Cristiani sisters and the Diano menagerie animals.

In early February Benny Cristiani leased the King Bros. title from Floyd King and with Chita and Cosetta and their husbands revealed plans to field a much smaller version of the Lucio Cristiani-managed show. They took another talented duo—Freddie and Ortans Canestrelli—with them.

As for the absence of Diano animals in the menagerie for the second time in four years. "Tony Diano didn't want to come back—or something," recalled Norma Cristiani. "So Pete said, 'Well, hell, we'll buy them.' So we bought a rhino and a hippo, and he had the wagons built in town" by the Zaccinis. Pete also acquired a giraffe.

The brothers also moved quickly to fill vacancies in the roster left by the departing family members with a complement of well-known performers.

Ramon Escorsia and the Cristiani big show band in 1959. Photo from *Minutes*, the magazine of Nationwide Insurance.







The Cristianis' Four-High act rehearses.

# 'ROLL OUT THE SKY'

This story of the Cristiani Brothers Circus was taped in Sarasota, the circus's winter home. Charles Van Doren talks with members of the Cristiani family, more than 30 of whom perform in the circus; looks in on the sideshow and the menagerie; goes behind the scenes to see how the circus is put together; and watches an actual performance under the big top.

Among those interviewed by Van Doren is Ernesto Cristiani, 76, a former tumbler who founded the circus. During the circus performance we see Barragon, an aerialist; Vickie Cristiani and her elephant act; the Leaps, a tumbling act; Ortans Cristiani on the rola-rola; Daviso Cristiani putting a horse through its paces; Delia Cristiani, trapeze artist; and the Cristiani family riding act, consisting of five brothers and four sisters.

On May 3, 1959 the Cristiani Circus was featured on the prestigious Kaleidoscope television show hosted by Charles Van Doren. Ad from *TV Guide* magazine.

Signing on for their first appearances with Cristiani Bros. were Con Colleano on tight wire and, for the Philadelphia repeat dates, the Seitz and Mendez aerial routine. Eddy Kuhn returned with his important opening wild animal act, and Luis Munoz reprised his human projectile act, using the Emanuel Zucchini cannon. (Beatty-Cole countered with the Hugo Zacchini cannon act.) The Norma Cristiani elephants and Oscar Cristiani's group gave the show a respectable herd of 10. Ramon Escorsia led an eight-piece band under the big top. Clown alley counted 20 fun makers, an all-time high on the Cristiani show.

## Gearing Up for Cross-Country

The Cristianis recycled their sideshow and menagerie tops for a second season, but replaced the big top with a royal blue tent with the same dimensions as their grandiose 1958 canvas. To increase circus patrons' comfort, the circus ordered all-aluminum chairs with plastic seats and backs for the grandstands. Five new seat wagons were built for the general-admission sections. Veteran tent master Joe Applegate joined to handle the big top canvas crew, reporting to general superintendent Belmonte Cristiani.

The remainder of show's executive staff continued relatively unchanged, with Lucio Cristiani as general manager; Oscar Cristiani, assistant general manager; Paul Cristiani, general agent; Daviso Cristiani, superintendent of performers; Pete Cristiani, superintendent of concessions; Corky Cristiani, superintendent of wardrobe, and Robert Brown, treasurer. Lucio's son, Cris Cristiani, assumed the responsibility for moving the fleet. Bud Fisher was legal adjuster. Veteran contracting agents J. C. Rosenheim and Howard Y. Bary strengthened the advance, and Elmer Kauff-

man returned to head up the billing crew.

Prior to the start of the regular season tour, a NBC Television crew spent several days at winter quarters videotaping a special, "Roll Out The Sky," telecast nationally on May 3. The group photo taken of the family may have been the last on the Gocio Road site.

Their 1959 route posed numerous challenges. The coast-to-coast tour would require covering great distances between towns in the Rocky Mountain states and in the deserts of the Southwest.

The first stop—Norfolk, Virginia, for a three-day stint on April 16-18—telegraphed the punch to the Cristiani Bros. troupers. To

reach the Tidewater city, the circus fleet made its longest jump of the season—930 miles.

Agent Bary's booking of the date, with the Norfolk police as sponsors, paid off handsomely. As later described in Pfening's 1959 route book, "Three shows were given on the 17th and a record five shows on the 18th. In all circus history that number of shows had not been given in a single day before."

The April 25 *Billboard* noted that "Eddie (sic) Kuhn became ill after four shows and skipped the final one. Paul Cristiani estimated that the show played to 18,000 people that day and that a total of 35,000 caught the show in the (10-performance) run."

Looping back another 580 miles, the Cristianis played their first indoor date in Atlanta, the annual Shrine circus, from April 20 to 25. The Georgia capital city saw its first downtown street parade since the Robbins Bros. procession, featuring Clyde Beatty in 1938. Owing to limited space in the small arena, the high-wire routine of Con Colleano and the Elliots' mother-daughter Roman riding act had to be cut.

During the Atlanta engagement Freddie and Ortans Canestrelli visited family before motoring on to Macon for the King Bros. debut on April 25 at Warner Robbins, Georgia. Using a new 80-foot round tent with three 40-foot middle pieces and reserve wooden chairs from last season's Cristiani Bros. show, King Bros. played a route familiar to the show's namesake, Floyd King, who was not associated with the new venture. The smaller, compact circus moved up the East Coast and into Canada, restricting its westward stands to Allegheny Mountain communities. After seeing the show at its fourth stop, historian Joe Bradbury was unreserved in praising the newest entry in a September-October 1959 *Bandwagon* review: "Without question this show is perhaps the finest framed and best looking small canvas show I have ever seen." And the CFA's longtime director of public relations, Bill Hall, who witnessed the show later in New Jersey, was equally effusive in his



September-October *White Tops* critique: "King provided an entertaining, sometimes rousing performance in the intimate confines of a 30-foot high main tent. . . . The 1 1/2-hour program, frequently rippled by spontaneous audience applause, is capably backed by the 4-piece band of trumpeter A. Lee Hinckley [which] is tonally above many larger circus bands."

At 80' x 200', Benny Cristiani's King Bros. tent was the smallest among the three-ring tenters on the road in 1959. Cristiani Bros. edged out Beatty-Cole for the biggest-big-top title, the former raising a 140' x 290' showpiece compared to their closest rival's 130' x 280'. Footprint sizes of other big tops were listed in the March 18 *Billboard* as follows: Carson & Barnes, 90' x 210'; Kelly-Miller, 150' x 250'; Mills Bros., 120' x 240'; and Hunt Bros., 100' x 220'.

#### Show Wins Eastern Biz

The Cristiani Bros. tents, having been sent ahead after the opening Norfolk stand, were already up in the air when the rest of the show arrived from Atlanta in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, on April 25. There the Cristianis recorded a three-performance day. Strains on the 30-plus vehicles began to show as the motorized outfit made an arduous, 119-mile mountainous jump overnight to Kingsport, Tennessee. "A problem here getting the big top over the long haul, its delayed arrival caused a late matinee," the Cristiani route book recorded.

Business remained good, however, right through a nine-day stand in Washington, D.C., where on opening night—May 3—"everybody was glued to TV sets to see the NBC-TV program filmed a month before in Sarasota. Everybody was watching for a shot of themselves," according to the after-report.

Cristiani Bros. also scored good business in the Memorial Day week stand at the Philadelphia Lighthouse lot. Irwin Kirby reviewed it for the June 8 *Billboard*. The scribe termed the Cristiani performance as "slick in appearance and smartly paced throughout." Added for the Philadelphia run (May 24-31) were high-wire performers Seitz and Mendez and Frank Cook and the St. Leon Troupe's teeterboard routine. A unique feature of the opening "Mardi Gras" spec was Jim Douglas in clown garb as the announcer. Kirby also praised Ramon Escorsia's eight-piece band as "far and away the best to hit the Eastern Seaboard this year. It is loud and precise, delivering the skilled tattoo of old circus gallops and other traditional airs. . . .

"Basically, this is the same family-centered presentation of last year," Kirby pointed out, "but from the equipment standpoint great strides have been made over the winter." He singled out for attention a new generator truck "bearing two 75-kw units and mounting a tall pair of carnival-styled light towers which illuminate a large area for general foot traffic and the teardown."

As usual, 20 carnival rides fronted the Cristiani set-up, but the operators of both enterprises reported grosses better than the 1958 take. "Lucio Cristiani, owner, said it was double last year's," a separate article in the circus Bible reported. "Another show source spoke of a \$15,000 increase." Jerry Eagle joined as announcer after completing nightclub dates in Philadelphia.

#### Pete Repulses Plaster

After the circus had pulled good business at Youngstown, June 10-11; and Cleveland, June 12-14; a disgruntled vendor attempted to spoil the Cristiani show's first appearance in Cincinnati on June 20-21. "Show paper printer . . . Neal Walters attached the calliope, five elephants and a rhino, asserting they were the property of Ben Davenport and that Davenport owed him \$2,132 for paper," explained a June 29 *Billboard* article. "Davenport said he had sold

the property earlier to his son-in-law, Pete Cristiani, and a judge dismissed the attachment."

In reality, Pete said, he and wife Norma owned the hippo and elephants, while the calliope was Davenport's. Cristiani filed a \$10,000 countersuit against Walters, charging the incident resulted in adverse publicity and lost business. The matter was settled in time so that the animals could leave Cincinnati with the fleet, and the truck-mounted calliope rejoined the circus two days later. Incidentally, L. A. Bartlett was at the screeching instrument's keyboard and William Clough was the engineer and driver—the same Willie Clough who was briefly jailed in New Jersey during the previous season for not having a driver's license.

Chicago proved a tough hurdle for the Cristiani family. Unable to resign the lakefront lot, Promoter Tom Parker had to settle for three suburban lots. Unlike the previous season, when Cristiani Bros. hogged the media limelight, four circuses beat the Cristianis into the Chicago metro area. As pointed out in the May 18 *Billboard*, Polack Bros drew "phenomenal business: during a 10-day stand in March, followed by May appearances in and around the city by Adams Bros. and Mills Bros."

The greatest competition, however, came from Ringling-Barnum which not only preceded the Cristianis but also snagged an advantageous lot at the Windy City's new Chicago Amphitheater. The June 12-21 engagement was booked by Feld Bros.' Super Shows, Inc. The June 15 *Billboard* also disclosed that Irvin and Israel Feld were promoting other indoor dates for John Ringling North's troupe, including St. Paul and Atlanta.

Lucio Cristiani and his brothers must have been shaking their heads in disgust following the June 25 through July 12 showings on three different lots, none of them in Chicago proper. The route book observed, "The overall Chicago business has been very disappointing, however we gave them a real circus. . . . Cris Cristiani has been working on all trucks preparing for the long moves west. A few new tractors have also been purchased for the upcoming trek."

Despite a late arrival in Madison, Wisconsin, on July 13 following a 185-mile jump from the previous fly-infested race track lot, the Cristianis were cheered by a full house at the matinee and a straw at night.



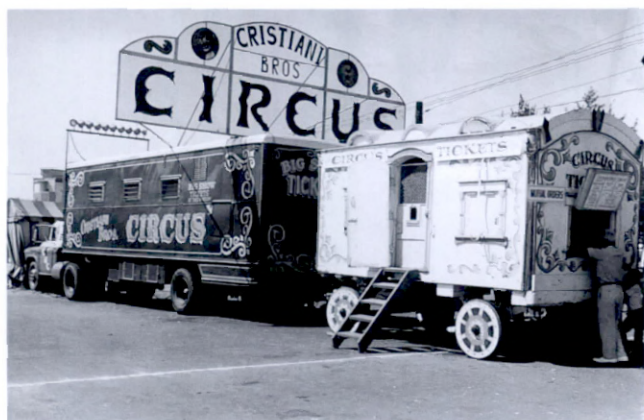
Eddy Kuhn, shown here with wife Charlene, had the cat act on the Cristiani show in 1958 and 1959. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

#### Bad Luck Trails Show

Cristiani Bros. helped celebrate the recent opening of the Circus World Museum in Baraboo on July 14, with the Gretona Family replacing Seitz and Mendez for dates leading to California.

"Papa (Otto) Gretona and his daughters Shirley and Gloria, stepped easily across a high wire near the stifling hot top of the 45 foot tent," a clearly impressed William J. Normyle wrote in his *Milwaukee Journal* review of the show on July 16. "Papa and his girls





An old Hagenbeck-Wallace ticket wagon was brought out of retirement to handle advance ticket sales when the Cristianini show played the parking lot of the Pan Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles from August 20 to 30, 1959. Photo by Charles Puck.

rode a bicycle over the thin, taut wire and edged gracefully over the ring in that most daring of high wire acts—the shoulder-pole carry of a girl standing on a chair.”

Allowing that Cristianini Bros. workers had set up “in a last minute frenzy of activity while ticketholders awaited at the gate” for the opening matinee on July 15 at the Braves ballpark lot, the newsman observed that “performers still put on a circus with all the trimmings that in recent years have been forgotten by the big extravaganzas.” For all its efforts during the three-day Milwaukee stand, the circus played to what *Billboard* on July 27 described as “moderately good attendance.”

Stands at Green Bay on July 20 and at Appleton, Wisconsin, on July 21, saw head-to-head clashes with Bill Griffith’s Adams Bros.-Sells Circus, resulting in hard feelings between the two shows and lackluster returns for both.

Moving out of Davenport, Iowa, on the second of a two-day engagement, the show’s squadron truck containing the stake driver and extra poles caught fire. Fortunately, the vehicle suffered relatively minor damages, though repairs were required to enable it to continue the 305-mile jump to Lincoln, Nebraska.

Worse yet, just 28 miles out of Lincoln, the semi-trailer carrying the 1,500 aluminum and plastic seats overturned after the tractor hit a pole. The driver, said Pete Cristianini, was one of his butchers, William Woodruff, who apparently fell asleep at the wheel of his vehicle during the late-night jump. Woodruff was hospitalized for treatment of severe burns over most of his body and required numerous skin grafts.

“Six hundred of the chairs were lost, the rest blackened and soot-ed,” stated the route book. “A real mess. On top of that business [at Lincoln] was weak.”

Following a 535-mile, back-breaking trek to Denver, actually, the show grounds were in Littleton, 10 miles south, four days of parading and performing left the bandmen gasping for air and the ticket wagon with meager returns. The show’s daily chronicle recalled that “all hands were busy here washing soot and smoke from the grandstand chairs using cleaning compound and lots of elbow grease.”

Cristiani Bros. played a series of dates involving long jumps through Wyoming, Utah and Nevada. The show was forced to bypass Reno when Polack Bros., protecting its turf, “rented the only lot Cristianini could use,” noted the August 24 *Billboard*. On August 10 at Elko, first of two Nevada stops, flyer Billy Woods suffered a dislocated shoulder when he fell during the matinee.

## At Last, California!

It didn’t get any better when the show finally reached the state with the Golden Gate. At Susanville, where the family had last appeared outdoor with their Bailey-Cristiani show, Con Colleano’s wire broke and he suffered two broken ribs. To top it off, business was light. At Yuba City on August 15 tinkers had to scrub their shoes after enduring two performances on a fire-blackened lot. En route to the next town, the spool truck carrying the big top was wrecked and had to be towed, then torn apart at the lot in Vallejo so that the canvas could be extricated. The truck was then sent directly to San Diego for repairs.

“These jumps since the Mississippi have been terrific,” noted the route book on August 28 at Visalia, where the show made its last stand before its prized destination. “Cris Cristianini has replaced 10 engines since Denver. But we are almost to the stand we have been waiting for—Los Angeles.”

There was no let-up in the equipment failures, as two seat wagons—one toting part of the big top canvas—had to be towed into the City of Angels. Things didn’t get any better at the show grounds, the parking lot of Pan-Pacific Auditorium, where in 1945 the Cristianinis had performed indoors on Art Concello’s Russell Bros. Pan-Pacific Circus.

The \$134,000 gross for the 11-day, 15-performance-stand was said to be much better than expected. (That was less than half the estimated \$300,000 record gross for Ringling’s 11-day stand in October at the newly opened 16,000-seat Sports Arena.) Cristianini promoter Parker’s cheery report didn’t take into account a whole raft of problems that affected the show’s bottom line.

Some were self-inflicted. The stake-driver broke down 100 miles out of Los Angeles and help had to be dispatched to get it to the lot. Even then, workmen couldn’t drive wooden stakes into the paved lot, so iron stakes had to be acquired.

Local bureaucrats also piled on. The circus cookhouse was up in the air when the fleet arrived for the set-up on August 19, but stewards could not light the stoves until a gas inspector showed up—at 4:00 p.m. Workingmen still got their lunches, thanks to Belmonte Cristianini buying food and drink from a mobile eatery.

The Los Angeles Fire Department dictated laying a water line along the 300-foot length of the big top, with fire hoses at 100-foot intervals, and that wooden blocks, each six inches square and one inch thick, be placed on either side of all seat jacks.

Retrospectively, Harlon DeWitt provided an estimate of the basic city-imposed fees and add-ons and arrived at a total of \$7,433, or about \$675 per day. At \$7.50, the business license was the smallest. Major components of DeWitt’s estimates, which he prepared on a single typed page on October 18, 1960, were as follows:

—Firemen	\$1,925
—Daily clean-up	\$1,375
—City license	\$1,175
—Final cleanup	\$500
—Chemical toilets (10)	\$440
—Police (minimum 1)	\$330

If anything, DeWitt’s estimates were low, since the circus ended up having to hire additional firemen and police officers to satisfy the city.

As a hedge against the higher operational costs in Los Angeles, *Billboard*’s August 24 edition reported that the show increased prices for the big top extravaganza; they were scaled from \$3.75 to \$2.25 for adults and \$3 to \$1.55 for children. (Comparable prices were charged in Chicago also, the magazine said.)



### Cristianis Wow L.A.

Once the compliance issues were settled, the troupers were ready to do what they came to Los Angeles to do—present an old-fashioned circus performance under the big top. The midway was flashy, featuring a decorative Hagenbeck-Wallace ticket wagon which promoter Parker had rented for the run. The big top looked as good as new, thanks to canvas boss Joe Applegate and his crew having scrubbed most of it with soap before putting it up. The side-show featured extra acts, including a giant and tattooed man.

"Many people from Hollywood visited," the route book reported. "The Ozzie Nelson family with Ricky and David were daily visitors, and they entertained several of the people on the show. Many movie people were spotted waiting in line to buy tickets."

The performance didn't disappoint, especially the elephant leaps performed by Lucio Cristiani. Neither did the returns at the ticket wagon.

"In California, the show was wonderful," Norma Cristiani recalled years later. "And the family did things that I had never seen, never thought of. Benny Rossi would open the show, trick riding down the track."

Norma was unexpectedly inserted into the performance when her niece, Oscar Cristiani's daughter Vickie, suffered a season-ending injury during the August 23 matinee when she slipped from an elephant and broke her ankle in six places against the ring curb. She was hospitalized for the remainder of the run. Trick rider Rossi, whom Vickie later married, was injured the same day when



The steam calliope was overhauled and was placed in a new wagon for the 1959 Cristiani season. Photo by Robert D. Good.

his feet became caught in a guy wire. Benny suffered a facial cut in the mishap requiring 22 stitches.

Cristiani Bros. business continued good in Long Beach and San Diego, but there was a noticeable drop-off in gate receipts as the show looped back into the Los Angeles area for suburban engagements. The decline was accompanied by the loss of key personnel and escalating breakdowns of vehicles critical to the show's movement and performance. Boss canvasman Joe Applegate and the Ray-Dels left on September 13 in San Pedro, and announcer Paul Eagle closed the next day at Santa Monica. The route book's sparse notations following a stand at Santa Barbara on September 15 reflected the show's mounting problems: "Working men very short now, which means cherry pie for the performers. Lack of property men slowing the show."

In the backyard the brothers were debating a proposal which might have salvaged what inevitably became a financially disastrous season. "We did real well in California," Pete Cristiani recalled. "The brothers were debating whether to close the show"

and open the 1960 season there, as Clyde Beatty had done in the early 1950s.

Retired wild animal trainer Bert Nelson approached the Cristianis during their Los Angeles-area engagements with a suggestion that stirred up considerable debate. Revealing details of the proposal, Pete recalled that "Bert was in the real estate business in Alhambra. He discovered that a trucking company had gone out of business in Baldwin Park [site of the Al G. Barnes Circus winter quarters in the 1920s and 1930s]. He told my brothers the place was vacant. It was available. They were going to rent it and winter there."

In a 2011 phone interview from her home in Orlando, Vickie Cristiani Rossi said Paul Cristiani, the show's general agent, supported the idea of truncating the 1959 tour in Southern California. "He was very straight-thinking," Vickie said. Accepting the plan "could have saved us a lot of money, at least in the short run," she insisted.

But Lucio, the acknowledged leader of family affairs since 1935, ultimately decided to continue on to Florida, even though officials in Sarasota had refused to let the circus winter there.

The period of indecision, however, distracted the brothers' attention from the route ahead, Pete said. "They hesitated a little too long, and they got behind in their booking."

### Low Morale on "Death Trail"

As the show headed back East, it entered what Pete called "the death trail" of the desert Southwest. "I heard that expression from Zack Terrell when we were in California on the Cole show. He never came back East that way. He'd cut across Sacramento to Denver."

Cristiani Bros. route book postings succinctly demonstrated the outcomes: September 22, Calexico, California—"Half house in the afternoon; night a few more than that. Billing and publicity late here."

September 22, Yuma, Arizona—"Billing a problem here also. Business light, troubles heavy. Gerry Soules going to the Ringling show."

September 27-28, Tucson—"These long jumps are really killing. Bill crew only a few days ahead. . . ."

September 30, Las Cruces, New Mexico—"Personnel tired, business poor, morale low."

After a series of disappointing stands through the heart of Texas, Cristianis Bros. arrived in Houston on October 15. This was another Tom Parker-promoted date. The family's hopes that this three-day engagement would stem their losses were quickly dashed.

Greeting the Cristianis outfit were 24-sheet billboards promoting the upcoming Houston Shrine Circus, whose advance apparently had cut into Cristianis promotions. Despite a downtown parade, the opening-night press preview and generous publicity in Houston media, the performances recorded no full houses.

The show was forced to lay over and reorganize following its one-day appearance at nearby Baytown on October 18. Pete said the show had shed many acts by that time, leaving the family to fill the gaps in the roster. To shrink the daily nut, several units were sent back to Sarasota.

Pete also took advantage of the Texas layover to fly back to Sarasota. "Norma was there with the kids in school. I met Walter Kernan, who was a good friend, and he said, 'You're not doing nothing. Come on with me and we'll drive to New Orleans,'" where the Beatty show was playing towns in the area. Pete spent two days on the rival show, accompanying Kernan and McClosky on visits to Bourbon Street before rejoining the idled family cir-



cus in Southeast Texas. Less than two months later he would be doing business with the Beatty partners.

The home stretch of the interrupted Cristiani tour, which was booked on short notice by Jake Rosenheim, began on October 25 in Texas City. Setting up for single dates only in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, the show played back-to-back stands at Apalachicola and Perry, Florida, on November 1 and 2 before returning to Sarasota.

Cristiani Bros.' coast-to-coast tour covered 12,984 miles.

Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. completed its first season under the new title on November 8 with three strawed performances at St. Petersburg.

Benny Cristiani's King Bros. Circus was out 31 weeks and traveled 11,300 miles, which ended on November 28. The returns were sufficient to warrant a second tour in 1960.

#### Good News-Bad News on 1959

The future direction of the larger Cristiani circus was somewhat more complex, with media giving mixed messages. On one hand, a November 7 story in the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* took a positive spin: "Cristiani Bros. Circus returned to its home base in Sarasota this week after a seven-month tour which saw the Circus play 186 cities of which 180 were one-day stands. . . ."

"If the size of tent, family and animals means anything the show will continue to be tops. Yes, the tent circus is here to stay and as a matter of fact it is right here in Sarasota. . . ."

This tone of optimism stood in sharp contrast with a *Billboard* story on November 16 which admitted that "the show's 1959 season was 'only fairly successful.'" (This report drew a comment by Tom Parkinson in his January 4, 1960, "Circus Troupers" column, after he received the Pfening-produced Cristiani route book for the 1959 season. "Perhaps this one is unique in that it is an elaborate report of a season that wasn't marked with business success.")

The *Billboard's* November 15 account also contained a surprise announcement, that Tom Parker had been given complete charge of the show's advance. It disclosed that "after conferences with Ernesto and Lucio Cristiani during the last several weeks of the season," Parker was assuming the roles of general agent and promotional director and director of publicity and advertising. The promoter essentially was replacing Paul Cristiani, the show's general agent since it took the road in 1956. According to *Billboard*, Paul was to "stay on in a similar position, it was understood."

Also unsettled was the future of the Cristiani winter quarters. Since the city zoning commission had refused to let the family expand its facilities at its 20-acre winter quarters, "several of its cage animals are at Texas Jim's animal spot for the winter," *Billboard* reported on November 7. (Earlier the Cristianis denied rumors which surfaced in the October 12 edition of the circus journal that it would winter at its old wintering site in Macon or at York, South Carolina, where Wallace Bros. formerly had its quarters.)

#### Booted from Sarasota

As a local alternative, the Cristianis proposed to move their quarters to a 40-acre plot on U.S. 301 near DeSoto Acres. But some 75 residents attending a subsequent meeting insisted the circus would cause property value depreciation. The move also was opposed because of the "element" that the circus would bring to the area, not to mention the noise and odors.

By the spring of 1960 the whole issue of whether Cristiani Bros. would remain in Sarasota was settled. On April 27 the *Sarasota*

*Herald-Tribune* reported that Daviso and Louise Cristiani had sold the circus quarters to a Tallahassee couple for approximately \$25,000.

"The Cristianis have not announced what their plans are for a future winter quarters, but it has been rumored the circus plans to move to Orlando," the *Herald-Tribune* reported on April 27.

"This is the second winter quarters to be sold here within the past six months. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey sold its quarters last Nov. 3 [1959] to Arvida Corp., residential quarters." Ringling-Barnum moved to a new winter quarters at Venice, 20 miles south of Sarasota, at the end of the 1960 season.

Said Pete of his brothers' reaction to the sale of their off-season home in Sarasota, "They knew they couldn't come back here."

As the older Cristiani brothers gathered at the end of the 1959 tour to sort out plans for the next season, their youngest brother set out on a different course. "Pete Cristiani has his elephants plus the giraffe, rhino and hippo out as a unit to play shopping centers."

Pete linked up with Ben Davenport, who had his pit show on the Cristiani circus for much of the previous season, for the brief winter tour in Florida. Ben brought along his new bride, Jean Jacobs, whom he had married while the show was on tour in California. They both had lost their spouses within the past two years.

Ben was still married to Eva Billings Davenport when she died on February 22, 1958, in Sarasota. The couple had been co-owners of Dailey Bros. Circus until they separated in 1948, when Eva sold her share to Harry Hammill.

Jean was the second wife of wild animal trainer Terrell Jacobs, who died of a heart attack on December 24, 1957, at their home in Twelve Mile, Indiana. Jean's two sons by her marriage to Jacobs, Darrell (Gopher) and Dawes (Charles, also known as Termite) later were adopted by Davenport.

The newly-weds pooled their resources, which included Jean's elephant, and teamed with Pete Cristiani for the 1959 post-season tour under the title of Jungle Oddities Circus, a title used years earlier by Bud Anderson.

A December 14 ad in *Billboard* hiring agents for the show, specifically: "James J. Winters, Ed Hiler, P. D. Sellers, Tom Pofpel, or any others who are capable interested. Pete Cristiani or B. C. Davenport, 2507 Main Street, Sarasota, Fla. Phone: Ringling 7-0292."

Just a week later, Cristiani Bros. ran an ad in the same magazine. "Wanted. For 1960 Season. Acts of all kinds. Due to enlarging show, need Wild Animal, Aerial, Wild West, Tumblers, Clowns, all kinds of acts. Reply Cristiani Bros., Box 195, Sarasota, Florida."

The show needed to restock its menagerie in the absence of the Norma Cristiani elephants, which Pete sold to the Beatty-Cole show in early January 1960. Norma Cristiani recalled that she and Pete had decided to sell the elephants when they returned from the shopping center tour with her father. Ben Davenport told his daughter, "It's too much stuff to carry around, especially doing a free street show." So, she said, "we sold them to Walter Kernan. That was the biggest mistake I ever made."

In addition to the elephants, Pete sold the giraffe and the semi-trailers necessary to transport them.

On February 15, *Billboard* announced that Cristiani's elephant boss Steve Fanning had signed with Beatty-Cole in a similar position. Once again, Cristiani Bros. turned to Tony Diano to resolve that problem. Diano's animals would be back under the menagerie tent.

#### Circus Fan to the Rescue

A larger challenge, replacing trucks that were simply worn out from the grueling 1959 tour, became a sales opportunity for longtime Macon circus fan, Reuben Thornton. The owner of Thornton



Motor Company had been a constant visitor at the winter quarters of the King-Cristiani show in Macon. Now Thornton proposed replenishing the Cristiani Bros. fleet with 1960-model GMC trucks. These cabs came equipped with a new, more powerful V-6 engine, which General Motors was promoting heavily through its truck dealers, Pete Cristiani recalled in a 2011 interview.

Striving to achieve top sales status, Thornton "gave my brothers a hell of a deal. He sold them 22 GMC's. He told them, 'I don't want any money up front. You can start paying me when you get on the road.'"

Cristiani said Thornton was not only "trying to outsmart everybody around" in the GM network, but "he really liked the circus." Pete recalled being on the Dailey Bros. Circus in 1950 when Thornton sold Ben Davenport a number of Mack trucks.

But Thornton "wasn't a fool; he was covered" by insurance which would provide replacement trucks or engines. The truck dealer's largesse was crucial to getting the cash-strapped circus on the road, Pete emphasized.

Arnold Maley, who returned to the Cristianis after spending a year on a carnival, referred to the deal in a letter dated March 7, 1960. "We are also replacing a lot of the old equipment with ten new GMC Tractors and all new truck on advance. . . .

"We are very busy here in quarters now getting ready for opening date on April 2, at Jacksonville, Fla., followed by Macon, Georgia, then on up into Tennessee, Va. and West Va., the usual spring route."

But the show's advance had taken a different turn in the advance. As Maley wrote to a Canadian correspondent, "Tom Parker is not here anymore having been succeeded by James Allen Winters assisted by J. C. Rosenheim. . . .

"According to present plans this show will not be coming to eastern Canada this year, however understand Beatty is coming your way and the other Cristianis with King Bros. are going to western Canada entering probably at Estevan, Sask."

Benny Cristiani and his co-owner-brother Ramo had signed a lease agreement with Floyd King's wife Vicki for the repeat use of the King Bros. title and were getting their show ready for tour at winter quarters in Punta Gordo, Florida.

The King and Cristiani Bros. shows were among the 18 tented circuses (40 in all) listed in *Billboard's* "Census of Circuses" on April 11. Other canvas touring outfits and their owners included Adams & Sells (William Griffith), Beatty-Cole (Jerry Collins, Randolph Calhoun, McClosky and Kernan), Beers-Barnes (Charles Beers and Roger Barnes), Carson & Barnes (Jack Moore and D. R. Miller), James Christy Circus (Corky Plunkett and Vernon Pratt), Famous Cole (Herb Walter), Hagen Bros. (Howard Suesz), Hunt Bros. (Charles and Harry Hunt), Kelly-Miller (D. R. Miller), Mills Bros. (Jack and Jake Mills), Sello Bros. (Roy Bible), Sterling Bros. (Bob Stevens), John Strong Circus, Turner Bros. Dog & Pony Show (Percy Turner), Wallace & Clark (operated by Pat Graham and Rob Thornton), and Wonder Bros. a new entry owned by Sam Bochlich and Frank and Janet Burger.

Beatty-Cole opened the 1960 tour as the dominant tent circus, pitching a new 150' x 300' big top, compared to the Cristianis' 140' x 290' main tent seeing its second season of use. The McClosky-Kernan organization also recaptured the Memorial Day week stand at Philadelphia from Cristianis Bros.

#### "Conspicuous by Absence"

That the outfit was somewhat smaller in its fifth season was noticeable to circus historian Joe Bradbury, who was on hand when the Cristianis circus pulled into Macon on a Sunday to set up for

its second date of the season on Monday, April 4. "Show again played the Central City lot," Bradbury recalled in notes for a video released later. "There were 13 fewer vehicles than the previous year; however, the big top . . . new in 1959, was used. There were twelve elephants, seven of Diano's and five of Oscar Cristianis'."

Another circus follower, Harold Rupp, counted 30 vehicles during Cristianis's May 12 stand at Dover, New Jersey. Rupp's observations left no doubt that the Cristianis Bros. performance and supporting physical plant was not up to the high standards it had set during the 1958 and 1959 tours: "The show looks good on the lot, although the blue and white color scheme is a little dull and not too circus-looking. All the canvas on the show appears to be last year's—blue Big Top and a striped menagerie-side show top.

"Conspicuous by their absence are the steam calliope, and the new hippo, rhino and giraffe trucks that were on last year's show. Animals on the show (rhino, hippo and giraffe) are the property of Tony Diano. The show carries 13 elephants this year—8 Diano and 5 Cristianis bulls.

"Expense-cutting on the show is noticeable—fewer sideshow acts than last year, menagerie and sideshow combined in one top, no calliope, no wild animal act, no cannon act, a small clown alley, and a smaller number of the trucks on the show than last year. Despite obvious cutbacks, the show gives an adequate and pleasing performance with an excellent band and a fast-moving performance.

"Capital expenditure is noticeable in the new folding, truck mounted sideshow-menagerie banner line, and the many new 1960 G.M.C. tractors on the show.

"An outstanding feature of the Cristianis Bros. Circus is the reserved seating," Rupp concluded. "The three-unit folding aluminum and plastic chairs (new on the show last year) are used on a bible, jack and stinger platform. These seats are very roomy and comfortable, and it can be said that they are very possibly the most comfortable seats used on any circus, ever."

*Billboard* on May 23 termed Cristianis business as "fair to big" for the three-day stand that followed Dover. A matinee turnaway on Sunday afternoon, May 15, forced an extra show at night, resulting in a half house.

At Allentown, Pennsylvania, on May 27, the show was moving "on 33 trucks, with four more on advance," reported *Billboard's* May 30 edition. Freddie Canestrelli and his wife Ortans Cristianis were back on this show and like other Cristianis were seen in the three rings in numerous turns. Among the animal acts were Roland Tibor Jr.'s seals, Alberto and Rogera Zoppe's horse-dog number, and the Oscar Konyot Chimps. Featured aerialists were the Flying Wards, with Harold Ward as catcher and Millie Ward, Bonnie Armor and Reggie Armor, flyers. Producing clown was Billy McCabe, backed by Alex Mentler, Bagonghi, Hurice Herch, Maxey, Phil Miranda and Jimmy Daniels. Ramon Escorsia returned as band director and Bob Mitchell handled the announcing. Tickets were \$1.80 for adults, 90 cents for children and 90 cents for reserves.

#### Middling in Midwest

The Cristianis outfit, which was still very much a major-class show, was at a disadvantage to Benny Cristiani's King Bros., which was playing to good business in similar communities the early part of the season since its April 1 opening at Athens, Georgia. With tickets at \$1.25 for adults and 90 cents for kids, the circus had a smaller nut—moving on 14 trucks—and thus needed fewer paying towners to fill its 80-foot-round big top with three 40-foot middles. King Bros. also was carrying Diano's animals in

Its menagerie, as well as a stake-driver and several vehicles owned by the Canton, Ohio businessman.





Left to right, brothers Pete, Daviso, Oscar, Lucio, and their father Ernesto Cristiano in 1960. Photo by Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

Cristiani Bros., after completing two months of stands in Eastern states, moved into the Midwest on June 10 with two shows at Youngstown, Ohio. The circus spent most of the remainder of the 1960 season in the nation's mid-section, where it faltered on several occasions.

A combination of bad weather and competition made the Buckeye State less than hospitable for the family enterprise. At Elyria on June 11, "circus had about a thousand people for each of the performances. Tornado warnings and winds were very high," reported *Billboard* on June 20. "Storm hit the show during the night show, softening the lot. Elephants were used to tow customers' cars off the lot and then to move the show equipment." The weather was equally bad at the next stop, Sandusky. "Circus played to fair business after late arrival. Afternoon show started at 5 p.m. Night house had two-thirds of capacity"

A day-and-date stand opposite Ringling-Barnum at Fort Wayne, Indiana, on June 17 left both shows with light business. Another late arrival there left the Cristiani with less than 400 for the matinee; the night show pulled 1,200.

Tom Parkinson caught the show at Joliet, Illinois, on June 23, and his *Billboard* review of July 25 confirmed widespread observations that Cristiani Bros. "is trimmed to fighting form this year as it makes a critical tour." While acknowledging that he had seen "an entertaining circus," Parkinson also cautioned: "It is neither the mid-1958 nor the late 1959 show. But it is positioned somewhere in the middle. The nut is down. The family is handling every possible task. Given a break in business and no strain on the shorthandedness, it should come home a winner this time."

After playing a series of one-day stands at four Chicago-area towns, the show made its usual stands in Wisconsin, losing the night show to storms at Baraboo on July 9. Stops in Minnesota, North and South Dakota and Iowa followed before returning to Illinois.

There the extent of the Cristiani's financial problems became evident during the first week of August. Completing a one-day engagement at Champaign, the circus fleet headed for Diano's Canton ranch for "reorganization" prior to a one-week stand in Detroit.

The driver of one of the show's elephant trucks ran afoul of the law en route from Champaign to Detroit. The *Toledo Blade's* August 9 edition reported that an Ohio state patrolman stopped the circus truck for a traffic violation. That's when the officer discovered that the five elephants in the semitrailer apparently had not been fed or watered since they were loaded at Champaign the evening before. "Because of the poorly ventilated van-type trailer in which they were confined and the near 90-degree heat, the patrolman decided the animals had gone far enough without sustenance and called the Humane Society."

The animals were taken to nearby fairgrounds where they were given hay and water with assistance from the Toledo zoo. The elephants were staked out overnight then reloaded into the trailer for their continued journey to the Motor City, but not with the same driver behind the wheel. He had been charged with running a red light, having no chauffeur's license and failing to display a highway use sticker.

The driver was released after the circus fixer paid \$215 in fines and court costs.

Cristiani Bros. hoped to recoup recent losses during an extended run in Detroit. Booked and promoted by Tom Parker, the August 8-21 stand delivered mixed results. "Weekday afternoons were very good, nights were only fair," Parkinson wrote in the August 29 *Billboard*. "Weekends, which in the past have been the strength of many such runs, were okay but not gigantic."

Earlier, Harold Bros. had a successful 10-day stint in the Detroit area. The Cristiani's also followed on the heels of a Beatty-Cole run on August 5-7 at another lot.

Next major booking for Cristiani Bros. was the Ohio State Fair in Columbus where the circus was the top attraction from August 26 through September 1. Kinkers staged 11 performances in nine days in the fair's grandstand. "The circus menagerie Side Show was spotted elsewhere on the fairgrounds and it was doing about 1,000 tickets a day" according to *Billboard's* September 5 report. "The circus came away with the feeling that it had won all the business that was to be had, but that it could have been done in fewer days as well."

#### Pete Declares Independence

The September 26 *Billboard* dropped this bombshell headline and story: "PETE CRISTIANI PLANS NEW CIRCUS"

"SARASOTA—Pete Cristiani announced last week that he will frame a new circus for opening next April. He has leased the Wallace Bros. title and already has ordered or acquired most of the equipment. The new show will be set up either in Tampa or Palmetto.

"The new show will be owned by Cristiani and his wife. She and Jean Davenport will be in charge of the performance. Ben Davenport will be general agent. . . . Ben Davenport will be on with his pit show. It and some of the other equipment destined for Wallace Bros. now is with a shopping center show in the East. . . ."

Pete said his brothers were considering their own options for 1961. During the summer the family began negotiating with Ring-



ling-Barnum for a joint South American venture in 1961.

More than three-quarters through its 1960 tour, the once-vaunted Cristiani Bros. Circus was in the last weeks of its existence. But there were still commitments to be met.

On the day that the announcement about his new circus was being circulated, Pete was not celebrating. He and his brothers were struggling with rain and a muddy lot at Paris, Texas, that plagued the show for three straight days in East Texas. On September 26, reported *Billboard* in its October 3 issue, "torrents of rain on the soft [Paris] fairgrounds prevented the afternoon matinee. They loaded instead of attempting the night performance in the continuing rain." At Sulphur Springs the next day, the Cristiani show was finally able to set up on a fourth lot to stage the matinee at 4:30 and the night show, both producing poorly. And at Greenville on September 28 the circus had to settle for a narrow lot on a narrow street, raising only the sidewalls for a delayed 4:00 p.m. performance. "Lucio Cristiani said this was their first time to have the show without the big top, cutting out all production numbers on the track hippodrome and all aerial numbers excepting the flying return of Harold Ward and the troupe, which worked."

All the while, the little Cristianis apparently were doing much better in North Texas, where Ramo Cristiani said King Bros. would stay out until December. The show closed on December 3 in South Florida.

The bigger family show continued its downward slide. In its closing weeks, the Cristianis reported one good stand, at Biloxi, Mississippi, on October 9. "Most of those that followed grossed only a few hundred dollars each," *Billboard* reported the day after the show's final two performances at Treasure Island, Florida, on October 23.

By that time "the show had been running about 45 minutes, using only part of the family's own acts and a few others. . . . Much of the Diano menagerie had been sent back to Ohio."

Tom Parker returned to promote the last four Cristiani dates, which produced winners, especially at Treasure Island with business of about \$6,000 on October 23. The show had travelled approximately 14,250 miles up to that point. The circus remained there for two more days, finally heading out on October 25 for its new winter quarters at Sanford, Florida. Cristiani Bros. emerged for a final, successful weekend stand at Fort Myers on November 26-27. "There were three shows on Saturday and two on Sunday," *Billboard's* December 5 issue stated. "Acts included the Swede Johnson wild animal act, La Tosca, and others, plus the family."

Beatty-Cole went to the barns at DeLand with a winning season after its final performance at St. Petersburg on November 13. "The Beatty-Cole show reported a huge 25 percent increase in business on the season," making it the best of its history, *Billboard* reported on November 21. Both Clyde Beatty and the Cristiani family's acts were booked to appear on the E. K. Hernandez Circus in Honolulu in mid-February 1961. Fred Pfening Jr., who had produced attractive route books for Cristiani Bros. in 1958 and 1959, put out a similar 64-page publication for Beatty-Cole's 1960 edition.

Mills Bros. ended its season on October 10 at Uniontown, Ohio. Kelly-Miller closed at Weatherford, Oklahoma, on November 6 and returned to Hugo with what it termed a highly profitable tour under

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Newspaper ad for Cristiani engagement in Detroit from August 13 to 21, 1960.

its belt, including several months in Western Canada and California.

Charles and Mildred Hunt's camels were signed for Christmas shows at Radio City Music Hall in New York. Their Hunt Bros. Circus had closed over the Labor Day but continued on selective bookings. The Hunts said their season had been a money-maker.

Pete Cristiani took another step toward becoming a circus owner by establishing quarters on a former dairy farm in Tampa. *Billboard* reported on December 19. "The location has about 20 acres and four buildings. Cristiani revealed that he and Walter Kernan, co-manager of the Beatty-Cole circus, will leave December 27 for an 18-day tour of Europe that will take them to see circuses in Lisbon, Madrid, Rome, Paris, Switzerland, London and Copenhagen." Pete also advertised to buy "a six-pony drill, complete with trappings; six-horse Liberty act; [and] 2 good work horse elephants, gentle." And Tom Parkinson's column noted that Pete's Wallace Bros. Circus had applied for a permit to show at Macon, Georgia, of April 16, 1961.

The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable assistance of CHS vice president John Polecsek in providing the 1960 route for Cristiani Bros. In addition, circus historian Charles Hanson contributed background information on Rueben Thornton, Macon truck dealer. The writer also drew liberally from the files of *Billboard* magazine and from the 1958 and 1959 Cristiani Bros. route books edited and published by the late Fred Pfening Jr.

Next: Pete Cristiani picks up pieces of family's circus, fields his own show. **BW**





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# Lash LaRue and Other Tales

By Mike Straka



Lash LuRue comics were published from 1949 to 1961. This example dates from about 1957.

**D**uring the last years of the phone shows, my work was refocused to other projects. Our show did not stay out on the road continuously. As the sponsors and towns dropped out, it was very difficult to replace them. Each year the tour got shorter.

To keep me working, Philip Morris would send me out to work the circus unit on the Hanneford show. In addition, we did "special tours" and, that's how I met and worked with Lash LaRue.

I reported to Phil's costume shop one day while he was in a deep conversation with a rugged, down and out looking man. Phil looked up and said "Mike, I want you to meet the famous Lash LaRue."

I shook his hand while I wondered who the hell this guy was. You see I had no idea, had never heard of and didn't know the once famous cowboy movie star.

A brief history of Lash might be in order. The following is from his Wikipedia entry. He began acting in films in 1944 as Al LaRue, appearing in two musicals and a serial before being given a role in a Western film that would result in his being cast in a cowboy persona for virtually the rest of his career. He was given the name Lash because of the 18-foot long bullwhip he used to help bring down the bad guys. In his first role as the Cheyenne Kid, a sidekick of singing cowboy hero Eddie Dean, he brandished a whip to expertly to disarm villains. His popularity paved the way for LaRue to be featured in his own series of Western films. After appearing in all three of the Eddie Dean Cinecolor singing westerns in 1945 and 1946, he starred in quirky B-westerns from 1947 to 1951, first for Poverty Row studio PRC, and later for producer Ron Ormand. He developed his image as a cowboy hero dressed all in black and inherited from Buster Crabbe a comic sidekick in the form of Fuzzy Q. Jones played by the great Al St. John.

He was different from the usual cowboy hero of the era; dressed in black, he spoke with a "city tough-guy" accent, somewhat like that of Humphrey Bogart, whom he physically resembled. His use of a bullwhip, however, was what set him apart from bigger cowboy stars such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. His influence was felt throughout the dying medium of B-westerns. For example, he had an imitator, Whip Wilson, who starred in his own brief series, and even Roy Rogers started using a bullwhip in some of his Republic Studios westerns made in the same period.

He also made frequent personal appearances at small-town movie theaters that were showing his films during his heyday of 1948-1951, becoming the only cowboy star most children of the time ever got to meet in person. His skillful displays of stunts with his whip, done live on movie theater stages, also convinced young western fans that there was at least one cowboy hero who could do the same things in real life he did on screen.

Phil announced that he was sending us out on a short tour. I would emcee and do magic and Lash would recite some of his poetry, and work some of his whips into the act.

I thought wow—poetry, magic, whips—it can't miss. However, I did need to stay employed and this would be another adventure.

After Lash left, Phil pulled me aside and told me the real reason I needed to be on the tour. (I thought it was my superior magic skills, keen sense of business acumen or winning personality.) It turned out that Lash had a drinking problem. His problem was that he liked to drink to the exclusion of everything else. To Phil's credit, he was attempting to put some structure back in his life. A waiting audience and a set curtain time would be a good start.

My job was simply to keep an eye on Lash and do my acts. I was to make sure he was ready to perform each night. It sounded so simple as most complicated things are.

It was a short tour of six or seven dates. I was pleasantly surprised



the first night. Lash was a gifted showman. Not only could he act in the movies, he had the charisma to hold an audience. Of course, the whip work was not what it used to be. Sometimes it took two or three attempts to break the end off the cigarette.

As for the poetry, let's say it offered a nice departure from our usual baggie-pants review.

My fondest memories are our drives to the next town. I drove and Lash told stories. He told me that he had never handled a whip, but a director was looking for someone with experience. He put in several hours with the whip before going to the casting call. He thought he got the part because of his looks. He was a dead-ringer for Bogey.

He told me that his comic book featuring his character sold over a million copies. He told me that some films were shot in a week on the back lot areas. He claimed he owned an interest in a Las Vegas casino at one time.

Perhaps all that was true, I couldn't say. I grew to like Lash and perhaps that's why I let my guard down.

It was the final show, the last town. We checked into a motel that had a lounge connected to it. This should have sent up red warning flags, but I just didn't connect the dots. I had to run to town to deal with a number of issues. I got back to the motel just in time to leave for the auditorium.

Lash was not in our room. About ten minutes later, I found our western hero deep in a drink at the hotel lounge. He had been at it for some time so I suggested that we should go and do a show. Lash would hear nothing of it, he wasn't going anywhere. Next, I attempted bribery. I told Lash that if we went right now, the drinks would be on me, after the show. Lash response was "Let's stay and drink, right now, not later."

It was time to play hardball. I told the bartender that no more drinks could be charged to our room. This seemed to change his mind. We headed out to do our last show. On the way over to the venue, I mentioned that he might want to drop the whip portion of the act.

It's tough to remember the thousands of shows I've performed, but this night is crystal clear. After I introduced Lash, he walked to the center stage and paused for a long time. Lash announced that he had a new poem. It would be an honor to try it out here.

His new poem went like this: "Yank my doodle—it's a dandy."

You can well imagine how the rest of the evening went.

Another great Lash story comes from Bob and Nicki Kenny. This magic duo had the excitement of also touring with Lash. In fact, they were booked on a series of phone promoted towns in New Mexico. The cast of the show stayed in a motel in Albuquerque and jumped out each day to play the date. Each night they would return to Albuquerque. On this night, Bob was getting ready to start the show and looked around for Lash. He would normally be on stage right awaiting his cue.

Bob stalled as long as he could but had to get the show going. He walked onstage and greeted the audience. At the point where he would introduce Lash, he caught a glimpse of Lash backstage. So without missing a beat he introduced Lash to great fanfare.

After the show Bob corralled Lash and asked him where he had



LaRue was a popular B-movie cowboy. He is shown in this publicity photo dressed in his usual black outfit.

been. Lash told Bob that he had gone to the bathroom. Bob told Lash that they had checked the bathrooms when they were searching for him. Lash said that he had used his bathroom. He told Bob that he didn't like using strange bathrooms. He had driven back to Albuquerque to use the one in his motel room!

Lash was a kind soul and passed away in 1996.

### The Case of the Missing Override

Among the various phone promoters who worked for our show, Cliff and Dorothy Mason stood out. They were the King and Queen of our operation, the top producers.

Bill English, who oversaw all the bookings and promotions, told me that they were to be given special consideration. If they left instructions to wire transfer their overrides to them, I should make sure it happened. An override was 10% of the gross sales that was due to the promoter. The show would collect it as money due the show but, it would be paid to the promoter. Of course, if the promoter left unpaid bills behind, we would use this money to settle them. As a matter of course, I did not wire transfer money to the promoters. I would get a postal money order and send it to the address left by the promoter.

Early in the 1978 tour, we had back to back dates promoted by the Masons. The first town was phoned by Cliff and he had grossed more than \$35,000. This meant his override was \$3,500. I paid off a few outstanding bills and had around \$3,000 owed to him. I had received no instructions on what to do with the override. In addition, Cliff had not showed up at the auditorium on the show day. This was not unusual as most of the time they had to stay ahead of the show.

The next day I met Dorothy for the first time. She had posted a respectable gross and had showed up to see the show and collect the override. After the show, I gave her both overrides and didn't give it another thought.



Several days later, English gave me instructions regarding Cliff's override. I casually mentioned that I had taken care of it, Dorothy had received both overrides.

I'm not sure how long Bill yelled at me. He ran up a big long distance bill that day. It seems no one had bothered to tell me that Cliff and Dorothy were going through a bitter divorce.

Later in the tour, Dorothy and I had a good laugh over this. She told me that Cliff did end up with the override, but it had provided great leverage in their negotiations. I said that divorce could be difficult, separating a lifetime of possessions would not be easy. She said that they had not fought over the house, cars, money and the like. This peaked my curiosity so I asked what the disputes had been over.

Dorothy said, "The tap cards, of course." Tap cards are 3" x 5" index cards with the name of the business, its owner and what they had donated in the past. It seems that they had over a million dollars of tap cards to divide up. I can only imagine the lawyers' amusement with a couple arguing over piles of index cards.

### **The Sheriff Vs. The Clown**

This incident happened on Popeye's Magic Circus that we toured in the early 1990's. In addition to our cast of cartoon characters, we had Joy T. Clown as a feature. Joy was a professional clown and had years of experience.

We were headed for the next date and had to make a late-night jump. I managed to stay awake until two or three o'clock in the morning. At this point, I pulled over to the side of the road, exhausted. I knew we couldn't stop. We had to make more miles that night.

Joy the Clown said he would be happy to drive. I had never let Joy drive, I wasn't sure of his driving skills. With little choice, I reluctantly handed him the keys. I climbed in the back seat and promptly fell asleep.

I awoke to find us pulled over on the side of the road. A blue

strobe light was flashing all around us. Joy told me that he had been pulled over by a policeman. He told me that he would handle it.

Joy rolled down the window to talk with the sheriff. He started to explain and was cut short with a request for license and registration. In addition, the sheriff needed to see the paperwork on the trailer that we were hauling. We gathered up all the documents and handed them to the sheriff, who headed back to his vehicle and spent an eternity there. It must have been over twenty minutes or more before the sheriff returned.

The conversation between Joy and the sheriff went as follows. Sheriff: "Let me get this straight—your name is Joy T. Clown."

Joy: "Yes sir."

Sheriff: "That's your legal name?"

Joy: "Yes sir."

Sheriff: "What's the T stand for?"

Joy: "The."

Sheriff: "Your name is Joy The Clown and you live at 349 Bogus Road?"

Joy: "Yes sir."

Sheriff: "You're driving a car registered to a Philip Morris. Not the tobacco company, this is someone named Philip Morris?"

Joy: "Yes sir."

Sheriff: "Your pulling a trailer owned by a Tom Lyons?"

Joy: "Yes sir."

Sheriff: "Your licensed in the state of Georgia; the car is licensed in North Carolina; and the trailer has a Florida license plate and are all owned by different people."

Joy: "Yes sir."

Sheriff: "I have you clocked at 70 in a 30 MPH zone. However, it would take all night to write you up and figure this all out. I want you to slow down Mr. Clown. Have a good night."

After we took off, Joy looked over and told me that he had handled it well. I certainly couldn't disagree. **BW**



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# A Boiler Man Vacations with the Circus

By Clint Beery

*Clint E. Beery was born in Baraboo, Wisconsin in 1874. As a teenager he trooped with the home-town Ringling Bros. Circus before settling down in the heating, ventilating and air conditioning industry where he worked for a number of firms, most notably as a sales engineer for the Kewanee Boiler Company. He was a charter member of the Circus Fans Association, and was the organization's second president in 1928 and 1929. He was a well known visitor on circus lots around Chicago and counted numerous show folks among his friends. He died in 1950 and was interred in Baraboo. The following article is condensed from the November, and December 1927, and January 1928 issues of The Aerologist, an HVAC trade magazine published in Chicago. Fred D. Pfening III*

I am wondering how many of you who read this article, like myself, have many times thought how wonderful it would be if we could retain our memories and experiences, and take them with us while we turn back the years to the age of youth and happiness. You who have will understand my desire to return to the white tops, to circus scenes and atmosphere; to again ride the circus trains through the night, bringing a happy holiday to the crowds in tomorrow's town.

Hence, my resolution to spend my vacation with the circus, back to the age of youth, thrills and laughter. Why not?

So my mind quickly turns to the John Robinson Circus, pioneer circus of the world that for over a hundred years has borne the name and reflected the personality of John Robinson, who as a young man established the enterprise in 1824 (sic).

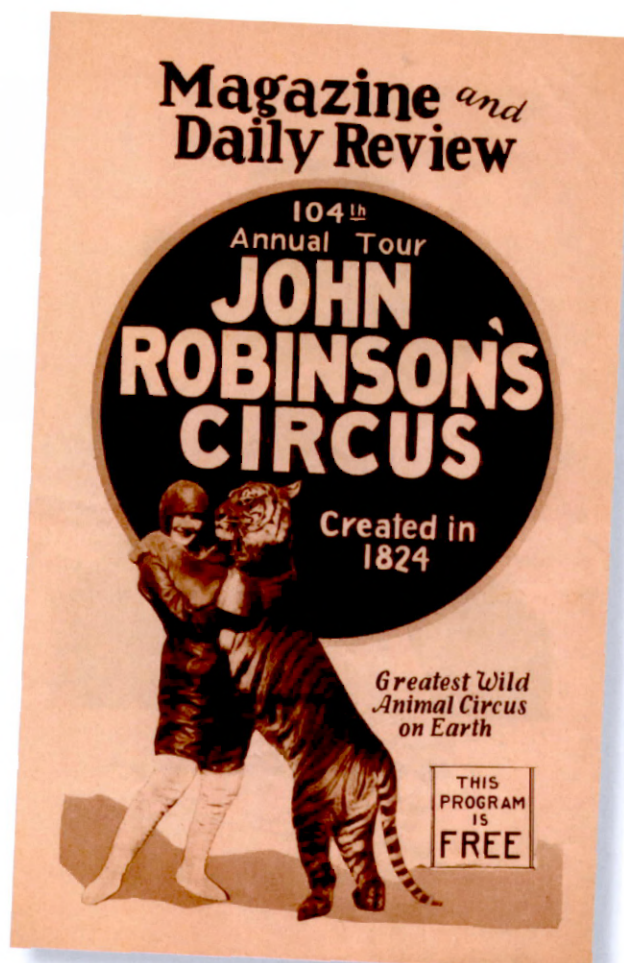
I communicate with my good friend Sam B. Dill, manager of the John Robinson Circus, and confide to him my ambition. A quick and cordial reply, eloquent in its brevity, completed my determination, so here I am all set to go.

With my camera as my traveling companion, Friday, August 5th, 1927, I board the Capitol Limited on the B. & O. en route to Washington, D. C., to join the show at Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Adjusting myself comfortably in the Pullman car, I gaze out of the window with a mind filled with pleasant anticipation. As we roll along, the great industrial establishments along the southern shore of Lake Michigan come into view. I am somewhat awed in contemplation of their immensity and make mental comparison of the human figures around the yards and compare them to the mammoth monuments to man's intelligence and industry. As we pass through Calumet, Indiana Harbor and Gary I forget for the moment that this is my vacation.

So I reassign myself to the problem of taking it easy. We are gliding along and the train crew is operating the Capitol Limited very efficiently, therefore I have nothing to do but take it easy.

We are approaching Garrett, Indiana, and I again become interested. It was here during my first season with the circus, the Ringling Show in 1892, that a Mr. Kelly, assistant boss property man, was shot, and I recall how the echo of that pistol shot in the dark remained in my ears for many days. The assailants were never apprehended and Kelly was buried in Garrett by the circus. It is



The 1927 John Robinson Circus program featured Lone Carl and her wrestling tiger on the cover. All illustrations from Pfening Archives.

thirty-five years now. Poor Kelly! I wish I had time to place some flowers on his grave.

We are on the way again, will soon be in Ohio. Arriving at Akron about nine o'clock. I am thinking of some good friends who live in Akron—dinner, to bed, good night.

Saturday Morning, August 6th: We are rolling along and have passed the famous Harper's Ferry. As I view the wonderful country, I think of the song, "My Maryland."

9:00 A. M., Washington, D. C.: 9:25, aboard R. F. & P. train to Fredericksburg. As we move out of Washington, I get a glimpse of the National Capitol and Washington Monument, the first since the World War.

Arriving at Fredericksburg, I take my camera to shoot a few pictures of the many historic shrines in this quaint and interesting city, before going out to the show lot, the first of which is one of Kenmore Hall, the home built by George Washington for his sister Betty, wife of Colonel Fielding, who was the maker of the first arms used by the Colonial Army. Down the street a block and a half, also on what was the old, original Washington estate, I photograph a large chestnut tree—the only living tree known to have been planted by George Washington.

Around the corner is the home of Mary Washington, mother of our first president. Down the street a couple of blocks I shoot a picture of the old Rising Sun Tavern, where George Washington and General Lafayette stopped when in Fredericksburg, and the rendezvous of Colonial officers. Just across the Rappahannock River can be seen what was the old, original Washington farm where the





Silent Sam Dill, shown here in 1923, was the manager of the Robinson show in 1927. He later became a pioneer truck showman.

historic incident of the cherry tree took place. I will hasten to the lot and meet Mr. Dill and my friends on the show.

At the lot I receive cordial welcome. The first man I meet is Mr. W. H. Thompson, assistant manager. It is about time for the doors to open. Another pleasure awaits me. Marshall T. King, National President of the Circus Fans' Association, will be at the afternoon matinee. I have met Mr. King and to know him is to anticipate the pleasure of meeting him again. We have quite a convention of Circus Fans, an unexpected pleasure. Mr. Marshall T. King and wife, from Washington, D. C., William T. Shook and son-in-law, from Frederick, Maryland, and Jake Tyree of Lynchburg, Virginia (who is also on the show for a few days), and the author. We are spending the afternoon to-

gether, greatly enjoying the performance.

After which Mr. Dill, my host, presents me with "the key to the center pole," also extends to me the freedom of the circus and what is mighty important, introduces me to the management of the cook house. We have supper together, after which I spent the rest of the day visiting with circus friends.

After the night show I am riding a truck to the trains. I find Mrs. Dill in car 60 and surely appreciated her cordial welcome. She gave

me the key to a private stateroom, telling me that it is to be my home as long as I am with the show. So I get my grips and proceed to make myself at home, thoroughly contented as tonight I will again ride a circus train.

A run of fifty-three miles to Richmond. Eleven-thirty P. M. The trains will not be loaded for another hour, so I will tell you a few things about the John Robinson Circus.

This show was established by the original John Robinson and continued by the second generation of the John Robinson family until its sale a few years ago to Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers, now known as the American Circus Corporation of Peru, Indiana, who also own and operate the Sells-Floto and the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. The square policy of the American Circus Corporation and its various properties is becoming well and favorably known to the circus-going public. The John Robinson Show is managed by Mr. Sam B. Dill, a graduate of the University of Indiana.

Likewise three members of his staff are university men: Will R. Hayes, legal adjuster, Iowa State, Law; Theo Forstall, treasurer, Lehigh University, Business Economics; Mr. Duke Mills, manager of the side show, Western Dental, Kansas City—something quite unique in circus history, four staff officials being university men. I will tell you more from time to time of my host, Mr. Dill.

The John Robinson big top seats approximately 7,000 people and requires four and one-half acres of ground for proper arrangement of the various tents. There are five hundred fifty people with the show which requires seven standard Pullman cars converted into circus sleepers to transport them. The mobile property is loaded into wagons, four, six and eight-horse teams, moving them off the lots to the hard roads and streets where several are hooked together in trains and towed by tractors to the runs where they are loaded onto the flat cars, ready for the railroad to move them to the next town.

Sunday, August 7th: It is just daylight and we are pulling into Richmond, another city with many historic attractions. Breakfast over.

Menagerie interior on Robinson show in 1927.







Theodore Schroeder, shown here with two of his charges in 1928, worked eight polar bears and later eight tigers in the Robinson performance

Have had lunch at the grounds—it is two P. M. A car is waiting for us. Capt. and Mrs. Schroeder, Slivers Johnson and his wife and the writer are off to visit historic and other places of interest. I take a picture of the building once used as the Capitol of the Confederate States. It is interesting to note in this connection there is today in Richmond a college for Negro women and a university for Negro men. Truly this is a changing world.

We are at the site of the old Libby Prison, now used for industrial purposes.

We stop in front of a quaint old churchyard. Around the graves is a curb about thirty inches high and a marble slab over all, duly inscribed. Walking up under the ancient trees, we take a picture of famous Old St. John's Church—the scene of Patrick Henry's immortal utterance, "Give me liberty or give me death," which comes to us from Colonial days.

Down the hill we find a quaint street and stop before a little old stone building, the shrine of Edgar Allan Poe.

After a ride up the shores of the historic James River, we are back to the circus grounds. I find waiting for me Circus Fans Harry Baugh and Charles Lauderbach, from Petersburg, Virginia, where we will show Thursday. I will ask you to stand by for the evening while I go downtown and write postcards to Chicago and other friends.

Richmond, Va., Monday, August 8th, 11 A. M.: On the lot; the tents are up, everything is ready for the afternoon crowds. Two hours before the doors open, so I will introduce to you some of the show folks.

Captain Theodore Schroeder, head trainer, who works an act with eight polar bears, also an act with eight Bengal tigers. His problem is to keep them in good condition physically and temperamentally. To know Captain Schroeder and his work is to realize the significance of the words "efficiency, reliability and loyalty." He certainly knows animal psychology. A kind person and a charming friend.

Miss Ione Carl (star) handles eight large male lions in a most remarkable manner, also does a wrestling act with a full-grown Bengal tiger—absolutely fearless, adds tone wherever she appears, a cheerful worker, a delightful friend, and destined for great things in the circus world.

Bob Thornton, equestrian director, a schoolmaster to thoroughbred horses in winter and skillful director of the performance during the show.

Carlos Carreon, in charge of the Wild West or after-show, horse trainer extraordinary.

Wade Zumwalt, director of the band, whose musical programs add tremendously to the enjoyment of the performance. He puts meaning in the word industry.

Dinner over, I am chatting with George Tardy, who takes care of the two giraffes, John and Mary. In the front of one of the giraffe wagons I carry my camera and excess baggage. 1:00 o'clock and Leonard Karsh at the front door calls, "Doors! Coming in! Coming in!" I'll walk out through the big top to the "back yard." Here comes Bob Hickey, press agent, with him are guests.

I have the pleasure of meeting Bishop and Mrs. Carter Wormeley, publicity director for the State of Virginia, and Colonel Peter Saunders, private secretary to Governor Byrd of Virginia. They wish to meet some show folks. I call Miss Carl from the dressing room and shoot a picture of her with our guests which is used in the Richmond papers that evening under the heading, "They Meet a Circus Queen." As we watch the afternoon show we catch the greetings of the various performers as they come in, which adds charm and happiness to our party. Supper over, I am having a delightful chat with Bert Noyes, in charge of the elephants. Bert used to have the elephants on the Gollmar Show, when we were both much younger. We have many mutual acquaintances and fan over old times in the Ringling and Gollmar winter quarters at Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Ernie Tucker joins us. He, like myself, is a Baraboo boy, and has charge of the concessions with the John Robinson show. We have many things in common about the old home town. His wife, Madame Lorette, works one of the herds of elephants, assisted by Bert Noyes. She also does a clever iron jaw act. It is truly interesting how men and women work together, each doing his bit, each meeting responsibility in fair weather or foul on an equal basis.

It is time for the evening performance. Colonel Peter Saunders is back with a party of friends for the evening show. 11:00 P. M., aboard car 60. A run of 75 miles tonight, tomorrow Newport News.

Newport News, Virginia, August 9th: A small lot here—things will be a bit crowded. The roof of a large building across the street offers opportunity for a good picture of the show being erected. Taking it easy today. Norfolk tomorrow. The sleeping cars are being ferried across the James River where it enters Chesapeake Bay. There will be a boat at 10:30, and a special boat for the balance of the show folks will leave for Norfolk at 1:30.

Captain and Mrs. Schroeder and myself and "Slivers" Johnson and wife (Schroeder's daughter and son-in-law) are going to try and catch the 10:30 boat. Downtown in Newport News, quite a group of show folks have been waiting fifteen minutes for a street car to the boat landing. In despair, we discover one poor lonely taxicab, and get to the dock just in time. It is a beautiful night, and the water trip, with the folks singing, dancing and everybody in a happy mood makes a delightful trip. Land at Norfolk. A five or six mile trolley ride and the whole gang is in a lunchroom for the inevitable bite before going to bed.

Norfolk, Virginia, August 10th: Good business here, like Newport News, the lot is rather crowded. Everything goes on schedule—the trains are loaded on time for an 82-mile run to Petersburg.

Petersburg, Virginia, August 12th: Another small lot, low and rolling. Mr. Thompson, assistant manager, returns to the show today from Richmond (his home town), where he remained a couple of days with relatives. It seems good to see him back again. Chatting with the Chief of Police on the show grounds, he tells me at 11:00 o'clock the Sheriff will sell a new Mack truck which was confiscated passing through Petersburg from Florida to Chicago.



HORRORS. I don't know what they found in the truck. The Chief tells me it will be sold at public auction from the Court House steps. Perhaps Mr. Dill might be interested in bidding. So the Chief and I commandeer an automobile and go to the trains for Mr. Dill, who accompanies me to the sale. There is a crowd of curious people around the truck. Mr. Dill and I look it over, but can't smell anything. The bidding begins, and they get a very good price for it. The truck, I mean.

I have the pleasure of again meeting Circus Fans Harry Baugh and Charles Lauterbach of Petersburg. You remember, they were at Richmond, Sunday.

2:30 P. M. The afternoon show is on. Charlie Underwood, press agent, brings two young ladies out to the "compound," or back yard. (The space curtained off with side wall connecting the entrance used by the performers and the dressing room, continuing from the dressing room to one end of the managerie tent, providing private space where performers and show folks can practice, assemble acts, or await their cue.) The young ladies wish to interview some show folks and get material for a little story. One of the girls confides to me that she would like to have her picture taken mounted on an elephant. I appeal to Bert Noyes who, in his usual pleasing way, brings out an elephant and makes it kneel, so the young lady can get on its back. The other sister operates the Kodak. Both are pretty much excited, the young lady with the Kodak asks my assistance.

I take her Kodak to set it for a picture, but discover she has turned her film entirely by. I give her back the blank camera and tell her when they're all set, to press the lever. Ready, go. Say, they never realized how big an elephant was until today and I suppose the girls are still wondering why they didn't get a picture.

Evening again. Doors open, seats are well filled up. I am standing by one of the rings with Mr. Thompson. Here I want to give a glimpse of team work, brevity, efficiency. Mr. Thompson turns and calls, "Hey! Chapin!" Mr. Chapin, who has charge of the ushers, comes running down the hippodrome. Mr. Thompson shouts to him, "Children, seats, long run, gonta sail." This doesn't mean much to the layman, but Chapin got it. "Get the children and people off the track and on to the seats. We've got a long run tonight, and we're going to start the show promptly on time."

Back to car 60. Some of the folks are sitting on the edge of their berths; others are outside the car entertaining with portable phonographs. I am chatting with Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Eddy, who do a very clever tight-wire act. Mrs. Eddy says, "Mr. Beery, would you be interested in our scrap book?" Of course, I answer yes. One thing of interest to me was the foreign press notices from the following places where the Eddys' wire act has been shown. Here they are: Australia, New Zealand, Manila, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Java, Calcutta, Germany, France, Spain, England, Portugal, Bolivia, Burma, Borneo, South Africa, Cuba, Mexico, and the U. S.

Gee, I wish I could do a somersault on a tight wire. It's all I can do to make the old muscles keep my golf score under 100.

Time for bed. Mr. Eddy and I are going forward to the privilege car for a cup of coffee and sandwich.

Sitting at a table, we discuss various subjects; before I realize it, it's 3:00 A. M. We start back to car 60, but have to pass through

two other sleepers, as the train is under way, rolling along at a nice clip. The first door we come to is locked; with the roar of the train, our efforts to attract attention are discouraging. Looks like we'd have to sit in the Privilege car or stand on the platform all night! Luck is with us. Wade Zumwalt sticks his head out of his berth, rubs his eyes, unlatches the door. SAVED. OH, BOY! 122 miles to Lynchburg, Virginia.

Lynchburg, Virginia, August 12th: This is Circus Fan Jake Tyree's home. He also has been a guest with the show several days, but will leave today. He is a dandy companion; I will miss him.

On the lot Mr. Dill asks me to assist in entertaining a group of sixty-five guests from the Elks' National Home at Bedford, Va., nearby. They are coming in busses. They will be guests of the show this afternoon. Also there will be about 215 orphans from a local institution. I am enjoying the afternoon helping make it interesting for the boys from the B.P.O.E. home. After the show, we escort them to the cook house. They have supper, and take the busses for the home, happy for days to come.

Lon Williams, old-time circus agent, and former agent of the John Robinson Circus, came over from the Home. He surely beams happiness at being back in circus atmosphere. He will go over with us tonight to Roanoke, a guest of Mr. Dill and Duke Mills, manager of the side show.

It's a revelation the way this show provides happiness for the old people and the orphans along their route. There is scarcely a day that a considerable number of reserved seats are not kept available for the young and old, the helpless ones to whom not much pleasure comes. The show folks will tell you that their reward is the knowledge they are making unfortunate people happy.

Good business here. The trains are loaded, we are on our way to Roanoke—53 miles.

Roanoke, Virginia, August 12th: This is a hilly country—and an interesting town. Showing on the fair grounds. A quarter of a mile away is the base of a high mountain, a beautiful picture.

The show over, I am sitting in the back yard chatting with Mrs. Schroeder. Elizabeth Rooney approaches with a pair of new crutches under her arm. Her husband, Carl Romig, attempted to ride the horse she uses for her principal act. The horse doesn't take kindly to any other rider than her. The result is two broken bones in Carl's ankle. His foot and ankle are in a plaster cast. We get Carl loaded on his crutches, and steer him to a shady spot. A number of show folks congregate for a chat. Mrs. Romig of the team Rooney & Romig is a Baraboo, Wisconsin, girl, whose family I have known since childhood. Carl's wife reminds him that it was about ten years ago on the Ringling show when he had a similar mishap. This brought forth a little story of their courtship. On the Ringling show in those days, an unmarried lady and gentleman found talking privately were subject to a fine by the management. The old saying "Love will find a way," is true even on the Ringling show. They laughingly recalled one night they were sitting on a sea wall at Galveston, Texas, a midget clown between them. Carl would give the midget a message which he relayed to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth would relay her reply. Juliet to midget to Romeo (triple play). They have been married ten years now and have two charming children. One of the refreshing things in circus life is the fine comradeship of family life.



Carl worked eight lions and later wrestled a tiger in the Robinson performance. She is shown here with two tiger cubs in 1923.





Robinson midway on a big day in 1927. Photo taken and colorized by Clint Beery whose initials appear on lower right.

Carl will sit with me tonight on the seats and watch the show—a privilege which comes but rarely to a performer. We are slipping away before the crowd goes as Carl does not find crutches a satisfactory means of locomotion. As we hobble across the lot, the moon coming up over the mountain, making a wonderful sight—43 miles tonight, East Radford, Va., Sunday.

Each day I have spent some time with Mr. Dill, my host, and have come to have a great admiration for him and an appreciation of what it means to manage a big circus. He has the responsibility of the investment, the responsibility to the public, and the responsibility for the comfort and welfare of his people. His days are long, and he seems to be just everywhere. One of the colored workmen says, "He's the walkinest man I done ever saw." With all his responsibility I have never heard him raise his voice above conversational tone.

There are many little stories around the show which give an intimate glimpse of this remarkable man.

The first week or two of the season are strenuous ones for a manager until the show gets running smoothly, and he is seldom seen at the cook house. One day a man taking care of the staff table, on recognizing him as the manager, brought in an especially fine spread of food, which showed extra care in its preparation. They still tell how Mr. Dill took the plate of food and stood up, inquiring if that was the food that everyone else was getting. On being answered in the negative, he directed it to be thrown out immediately, and the same food brought to him and in the same manner in which it was brought to everyone else on the show.

Another little story. The steward and chef on the show, Mr. Ells, an old-timer, a man about sixty-five years old, met Mr. Dill one day. "Good morning, John."

"Good morning, Mr. Dill."

"How's everything, John?"

"All right. Eggs are getting rather expensive. Have to think of something else, I guess."

"By the way, John, how long have you been with us?"

"About nine years, Mr. Dill."

"How do you like the show, John?"

"Don't know, Mr. Dill. I never have seen it."

"What! You've been with me nine years and never have seen the show?"

"No, Mr. Dill."

"Listen, John, you go in this afternoon and see the show. If you don't, there'll be a new chef here in the morning."

One day just before noon, walking through the menagerie, I met Mr. Dill, wearing an infectious smile. I smiled in return, and he told me one of the camel boys had two new records for his phonograph which he wanted him to hear. He was just returning from the concert.

Any manager must be capable of big things, and here is one who also has time for a kind word and simple acts of kindness. A general feeling pervades the show that everything is bound to be all right when Mr. Dill is around.

East Radford, Sunday, August 14th: The side show, menagerie, dressing room, cook house, horse tent are all up. The big top is never put up on Sunday. Mr. Dill and I stroll across the lot and seat ourselves on the pole of a baggage wagon for a little private chat. I inquire what the annual property loss in equipment left behind on the lot amounts to. He replies that it does not exceed \$10.00 or \$15.00. Here is a study in system. Over three hundred thousand dollars in mobile property, a complete cycle of operation every twenty-four hours—loading, unloading, setting up, taking down in the dark and re-loading approximately 180 times a season, with a loss of only \$15.00.

He calls attention to the wagon we are sitting on, No. 69, and inquires, "Do you know what that means? When wagon 69 is being



Phillip and Caroline Eddy, tight wire performers on Robinson show in 1927.

hauled to the train, it must not approach too close to the runs until they are ready to receive it. The train master can call to the driver, asking what he has, and from out of the darkness comes the answer, 'Number 69.' The train master knows that No. 69 is 15 feet long, 6 and 9 equalling 15, and appropriates it to a 15-foot space on the flats—another bit of system.

We have been chatting about an hour. One of the bosses approaches, stopping a few paces away, inquires, "Can I have a word with you, Mr. Dill?"

"Certainly, Jack."

"Mr. Dill, I just wonder if I could go home for a few days. I am sick."

"Yes, Jack, if you're not able to work. Could you stick it out until we get to Cincinnati? We could have a man there who could take your place."



"I don't know, Mr. Dill. I'm feeling pretty bad."

"Well, I'll wire and get him here as soon as possible. Try and stick it out a couple of days, if you can."

"Thanks, Mr. Dill. I'll rest up a few days and be back if you want me."

"Want you? Hell I want you as long as you live. You know, Jack, you'll always have a place with me as long as you want it."

There is quite a Sunday crowd on the lot. I promised some of the show folks to take some pictures today. See you later.

Sunday Evening, Aboard Car 60: Chatting with Mr. and Mrs. Dill in their cozy apartment. I have finally succeeded in getting Mrs. Dill to talk to me about herself, and I want to tell you how well qualified this fine woman is to be the wife of a circus manager, although if she ever reads this, I'll get my hair pulled. Nettie Dill made herself famous as a rider and learned her profession with one of the most honored families in circus history. Members of the McCree-Davenport family of riders became attracted to her in a certain Indiana convent, adopted her as a baby, and she grew up with the circus as a member of this honored family. Mr. and Mrs. Dill have been married about ten years now, and she is making as great a success as the wife of a circus manager as she did as a circus star.

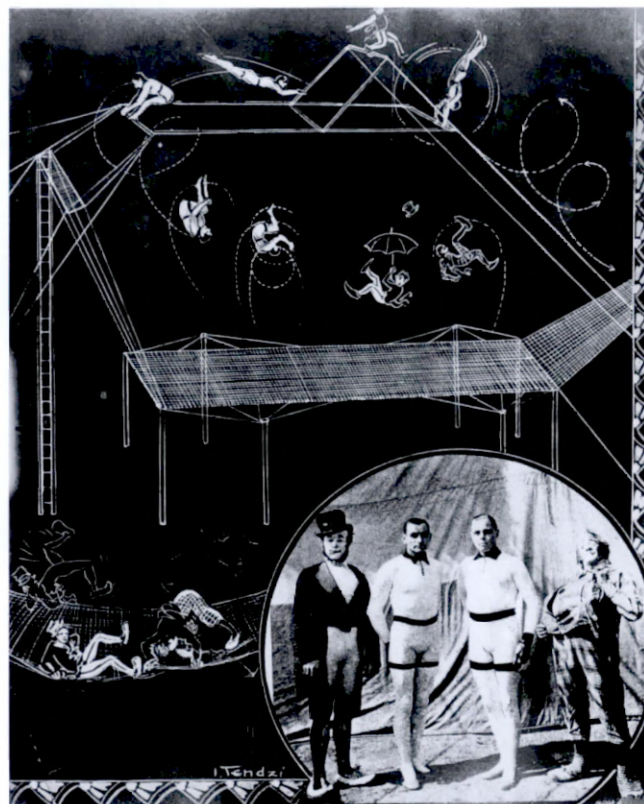
East Radford, Monday noon, August 15th: This is a small town, but the excursion trains are bringing them in. There is an immense crowd on the lot when the doors open. The night show is over; the last wagons are leaving the lot. Mr. Dill and I are on our way to the trains. Forty-three miles tonight. Marion, Va., tomorrow.

Marion, Virginia, August 16th: We are in the mountains now. This is a small but beautiful town. About a mile and half to the lot here, straight up. The tents are crowded with people from the hills, and they are very interesting. It is time for the night show. As usual, I accept Mr. Zumwalt's hospitality to occupy his chair while he stands and directs the music. Would you like to sit with me this evening and see the show? All right, come on.

The tent is filled with happy people. It is time for the performance to a begin. The band has on their costumes used in the spectacle, and are in formation. The music starts. Little Mary McKeone (Peter Pan) and a white collie dog are asleep on their bench in the arena. The fairy ballet is circling around Peter Pan. The King has come and after him elephants, camels, ponies, Zulus, and strange weird people, princes and fair maidens. Miss Allen is singing for Peter Pan. All the strange beasts and beautiful people in rich trappings are kneeling a courtesy to Peter Pan. Then comes the tinkling of cymbals and weird chants, an effort to awaken her. Now the riot of color and beauty dissolves. The music changes. The flying Kelleys and Monroes are way up on their trapezes ready to entertain you. Gee, how did they get up there so quick? Two troupes of educated ponies, with Miss Thornton and Miss Biron in charge, are beginning their act. The Kelleys have finished and give us a pleasant nod as they pass out.

Captain Schroeder with his eight polar bears is entertaining in the steel arena. I often wonder how he keeps them so clean and well groomed. They are forming a beautiful pyramid. A little old gentleman with grey hair, whom I have not heard speak a word since I have been with the show, is sitting on a stool by the steel arena. He is opening an iron gate with a hooked rod, and Captain Schroeder is hustling the bears out.

Everything is in readiness again, and in comes Bert Noyes with an elephant. Into the steel arena they go, and Margaret Thompson salutes the audience from the arena. Captain Schroeder raises his hand, the iron gate opens, and in comes a big Bengal tiger. Miss Thompson cracks her whip, and up he goes on a pedestal. One more leap and he is on the elephant's back. Around they go, and the



The Bob Eugene casting act was one of the highlights of the 1927 Robinson performance.

tiger is giving a fine demonstration of agility as he leaps through the hoop of fire from perch to pedestal and to his mount again. Bob Thornton is standing near, looks around with a smile, blows a whistle, and quick as a flash, Wade Zumwalt catches the cue, and the music changes.

Mr. Dickson has taken his place on the ring curb to make an announcement: "Miss Ione Carl will give a special exhibition, wrestling a full-grown Bengal tiger in the steel arena." Miss Carl waves a greeting and enters the arena. Captain Schroeder raises his hand, the iron gate opens, and Kitty, a beautiful beast, leaps forth. Miss Carl, with a flying tackle, has Kitty around the neck. They're down; they're up again! Miss Carl is talking to Kitty. The whistle blows, and Kitty is through for the day and on her way back to her cage.

Elizabeth Rooney and Mrs. Correia are entertaining us with a principal bareback riding act.

Glancing around, Captain Schroeder is standing back of the steel arena. The gate opens and in comes a troop of eight Bengal tigers. What a pretty picture as they come bounding in! Captain Schroeder is with them now. How quickly they take their places!

The liberty ponies are entering. Bob Thornton and Rudy are putting them through their paces. Each one wears a number. They have been mixed up: in a confusing manner; and while they find their places, the band is getting one minute of rest.

Mr. Dixon is making an announcement: "Miss Carl with her eight black-maned lions." Captain Schroeder raises his hand again; the iron gate opens, and they are in the arena arguing with each other. Miss Carl passes the arena to greet her audience. As she passes, Judy makes a leap at her and is seconded by several of his mates. Evidently Judy remembers how he wounded Miss Carl's hand a couple of weeks back. Somehow I can't help wishing he would behave himself. With a smile, she enters the arena, and what





Carlos Carreon was in charge of the Wild West concert on the John Robinson Circus in 1927.

a change takes place! Judy is hurrying to his perch. So are Caesar, Ben, Jimmie, Prince, and the rest of them. They seem much braver when she is outside. Now she has them in a fine pyramid. Wish we could get a picture of that. My, but she's working them fast tonight! She has them all lying down now but Judy, darn him! He's a stubborn brute, and mean. Now he's partly down, but he has knocked the chair out of her hand. Wonder how she's going to get it. She's got it and now they are all down. I feel relieved. They're up again; over the hurdles they go; the iron gate opens, and

they're gone for the night. Now we'll watch the Rudynoff and Correia comedy riding. Two fine acts, and I'll keep still so you can enjoy them. The property men are working fast to get the steel arena out of the way and prepare for the Eugenes. Even the property men are keeping time with the music as they take down and pack or rearrange props. They tell a story about a giant colored property man who used to pick up a 250-pound pedestal and trot out with it, with apparent ease. One night the program was changed from fast, lively music to a slow refrain. The huge property man dropped the pedestal, saying, "Hell, I can't carry it with that kind of music."

Now we'll enjoy the Eugenes as they fly from bar to bar. Listen to the laughter of the crowd at the clowning of this act.

The Eddys are coming in for their tight-wire act. They are leaving Barbara, their nine-year-old daughter, with us, until they finish. Miss Rooney in one ring, the Eddys in the center, and Tetu Robinson on the slack wire. The main part of the act is over, and Phillip Eddy is preparing for a back somersault on the wire. I know by the happy shouts and hand clapping they have finished. Barbara on my knee is playing 'possum to make daddy and mother think she was asleep and not interested in their performance. She awakens with a laugh and they're off, smiling—through for the day.

The menage act is on. The horses and their fair riders are stationed all the way around on the track. Note the way they go through the various stunts. The remarkable dancing horses keeping time with all four feet. Have you ever seen anything more perfect? Miss Etta Carreon surely knows her horses, and have you ever seen a more graceful rider than Miss Thornton? Carlos Carreon is standing nearby watching every movement and studying to detect any possible break in their gait, and opportunity for any improvement. I have seen him do this day after day in such an unobtrusive way that one scarcely notices him. They tell a story about Carlos' fidelity—how up in Michigan, when the floods came suddenly just as the show started, the hazards were too great to put on the animal acts, the management was in a dilemma to provide substitute entertainment in an effort to give the people value received.

Carlos, who is supposed to work in the after show, came running down the track giving a wonderful demonstration of lariat throwing and acrobatics, rising to the occasion and demonstrating again the

performer's code, "carry on." And so it goes—two hours of solid, rapid, moving entertainment and music. Every day is bargain day for people who visit the John Robinson show. 64 miles tonight, Bristol, Tenn., tomorrow.

Bristol, Tennessee, August 17th: Another small lot, but close to the city and the runs. Good business and everyone well. Mr. B. B. Sullivan of Kingsport, Tenn., where we will show Friday, is our guest for the afternoon. He represents the Kiwanis Club at Kingsport, and some of us will be guests of the Kiwanis Club at Kingsport Friday. 45 miles to Johnson City.

Johnson City, Tennessee, August 18th: A fine lot here close in. Our guest this afternoon, Mr. Carroll King, newspaper man and former theatrical agent. The afternoon show is over. Miss Carl, wearing the leather suit in which she wrestles the tiger, and the author, each with a lion cub about four weeks old, are in a closed car with the cubs crawling over our laps, on our way to the National Sanitarium, where we entertain invalid veterans of the World War. Going through the various wards and giving the boys a chance to see the lions. The McKeone family, acrobats, and George Harmon, midget clown, are out on the lawn entertaining the convalescents assembled on the porches and balconies. An hour at this wonderful institution with its ten or twelve buildings. We are returning to the lot. The cubs are still crawling over us, but somehow we both feel in a quiet mood, after visiting these poor people, particularly in the wards from which they will never return.

The night show is over and I am staying on the lot with Mr. Dill. The two portable electric light plants are humming a song of electrical energy. The searchlights are playing across the lot. Workmen are taking down the seats and loading them into the wagons. Two working elephants are pulling the foot of the quarter poles out so that they can be lowered to the ground and loaded on the wagons. Half of the side poles have been removed, and the big top is about ready to come down. Jack Moore, boss canvasman, is standing by us near the light wagons. Suddenly he shouts, "Number one." From the first center pole comes the reply of an attendant, "Number one." "Number two," and the answer comes back, "Number two." "Number three." There is a moment of delay. Something here not quite ready. "Number three," he calls again. This time the answer comes back, "Number three." "Number four." "Number four." "Let 'er go," he shouts. We hear the squeak of pulleys and the swish of rope and down flutters the great canvas, trapping millions of cubic feet of air underneath as the outer rim reaches to the ground before the bale rings at the peak. Huge billows dance up and down in the shadows and look like an angry sea at night. As the air escapes, the waves recede and finally, with a gentle flutter, it lies flat on the ground. Men are swarming over it unlacing the various sections and rolling them into great bundles, which they quickly lace into large bags. Two eight-horse teams with canvas wagons are approaching, one from either direction. The huge bales are rolled behind the wagon, placed in rope slings, arranged through pulleys in the wagon. A working elephant comes along, is hooked to the rope sling, and walks away in the opposite direction. The canvas rolls up the gate and into the wagon, making a weird picture. The searchlights are sweeping over the lot. Here and there small groups of men are pulling a few scattered stakes. I see a row of men in the far end of the lot lined up in company front fashion, each with a lantern in his hand. They are combing the lot for stray property. The last canvas bag is in the wagon. The big poles are loaded; the teams are pulling them off the lot to the roadways. The two working elephants have completed their labor; their keepers mounted on their heads, with chains clinking, are going down the road side by side. They seem in a hurry to get home to the cars. As they pass a forest of pine trees, and under



the road lights, they make a grotesque and weird picture. 25 miles tonight to Kingsport, Tenn. Good night.

Kingsport, Tennessee, August 19th: This is a comparatively new city—about 10 years old and laid out for future growth. A good lot close to town. The crowds are already in the city. It is 11:00 o'clock, and the automobiles are here to take our party for a ride around the city, after which we attend a Kiwanis luncheon. I have the honor of addressing the Kiwanis members—about eighty in all, subject, "The John Robinson Circus." It is a pleasure to look over these representative businessmen and to compare them with my friends of the show. I cannot refrain from commenting that I could not tell which was which, they looked very much alike—human, intelligent, interesting, the kind from which to pick good friends. Commenting upon each, the following are introduced to the local Kiwanians: Miss Lone Carl, Captain and Mrs. Theodore Schroeder, Phillip and Caroline Eddy, Bob Thornton, Wade Zumwalt, and Miss Irene Allen, who entertains with song. Several Kiwanis committeemen are our guests this afternoon. This evening I recognize many I met at the pleasant luncheon this noon. 73 miles tonight—Norton, Virginia, tomorrow.

Norton, Virginia, August 20th: We are in a narrow valley high up in the mountains. The railroad yards on one side of the valley and the business section on the other, fronted by a concrete roadway. A mountain stream crosses the lot between the menagerie and big top, which are arranged end to end today. The lion, tiger, and bear cages are out in the open along the roadway, where the animals can be shifted to the arena. The sky is overcast and we have rain most of the day. The first serious rain we have had since I have been with the show. The lot is low and it will require some extra effort to get the show back on the trains. 102 miles tonight. Sunday in Bluefield, W. Va.

Bluefield, West Virginia, Sunday, August 21st: We spend considerable time today with Mr. H. I. Schott and his son, owners of the Bluefield Daily News and Telegraph, who are friends of the show. The show is on the fair grounds about two and a half miles from town, and a very beautiful locality.

August 22nd: Charlie Underwood, press agent, and I are in the Bluefield Daily Telegraph office to meet the group who will be guests of the show today. Mayor Henry Callaway of Bluefield,

through the local newspaper, has organized the "John Robinson Fifty-year Club." All residents of Bluefield and the surrounding country who saw the John Robinson show 50 or more years ago are to meet at the newspaper office. Transportation will be provided; and they will be our guests this afternoon. I spend an hour listening to many interesting stories of the old days. When we count noses and give them badges, we find seventy-five men and women assembled in front of the newspaper office for a photograph, after which we are off to the show grounds. I am accompanied by one of the oldest of the party, Miss Elizabeth Givens, agent, 92 years—who saw the John Robinson Circus 80 years ago when she was a child of twelve. Her nephew has brought her and we will get her into the tent and comfortable before the main crowd arrive. They are an interesting group. I wish you could see and hear them as they enjoy the show. Seven or eight are trying to tell me a story at once, and I am trying to listen to all of them.

Well, this is my last day with the circus. This evening I will leave for home and familiar scenes. Between shows, and to keep occupied, I will tell you why I like the circus.

Because it is a world of system, where each detail combines to bring happiness and pleasure to fellow beings. Here you will find true comradeship, where sincerity obtains. It is a world whose people live close to elemental environment. It is here that when the winds threaten and the rains fall, the best—the worthwhile—comes to the surface. The smile becomes a little broader, and the reverence a little deeper. It is a world over which hazard hovers, where, as a flash, men and women meet emergency and the world and they, know just how steadfast is their courage. Here is a place where time effaces all caste among those who are right—where human worth is appraised by more unerring means than evening clothes or workman's blouse, and fortunate are those who are found worthy of friendship in its fraternity.

The doors are open and I will be gone in a few moments. I am waiting to hear the first strains of music as they start the performance. Dear old John Robinson Circus—you who, for a 100 years have brought happiness to succeeding generations, you, who though old, yet are eternally impersonated by youth, how I hate to bid you goodbye! I am not going back to the dressing room—nor even to the menagerie. As I slip away, the boys out front know that I am going. Gee, it's dark outside. **BW**

Wade Zumwalt led a fifteen piece band on Robinson in 1927.







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# CIRCUS HISTORY: A RATIONALE

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Southern Vermont College, Retired

*This paper was presented at Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference in San Antonio, Texas on April 11, 2011.*

For fifteen years we have examined circus and circus culture. We have looked at outstanding performers, changing methods of circus presentation, circus as a home for those who would otherwise be outsiders, gender roles in circus, the impact of circus in literature and the arts, as well as the aesthetics of circus performance. This paper addresses the ways in which circus provides insight into the world in which it exists.

With instant messaging and access to almost everything and everyone readily available on the internet, we live in a world of NOW. Before the electronic media, this was also true, if to a lesser degree, in a nation of immigrants and their children that has traditionally looked toward new achievements, higher standards of living and new frontiers, rather than backwards. Writers such as Henry James assured us that compared to Europeans we had little past to look at. Or so it seemed to him.

This country's welcoming doors became less welcome after the immigration reforms of the 1920's; previously there had been ex-

smokestack industries that powered our expansion and our prosperity with immigrant, and finally, African-American labor, have lost ground to foreign competition and to new electronic technologies. Today we seldom buy sophisticated products, or even soft goods, made in this country which is facing great challenges, not primarily from abroad, but from within.

Voices, unimagined a generation ago, call for shredding the safety net that evolved in the Great Depression and brought a degree of security to most, not just to the wealthy. So called Rigid Constructionists contend that anything not included in our original constitution that was formulated in an underpopulated rural land and which recognized slavery, does not belong in it. Perhaps this lack of community responsibility has been fostered by cell phones and other machines that isolate us from our neighbors. We are anxious about our children having unsupervised "free" play in a frightening world. Not only is ours increasingly a NOW society, it is increasingly an "I" society that diminishes our awareness of, and obligations to, our neighbors.

What can circus tell us about this? We are now a post industrial nation with an aging population that increasingly needs social services. This nation has a history which should be studied to help us understand who we are and where we might be going in the future. The old myths about ourselves kept us from taking the study of history seriously and when we did study it, we usually studied governments and elites rather than the lives of people. Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* shows what we have omitted. In my state of Vermont there is little or no mention in the schools of the state's dramatic labor history and of the struggles of Vermont's quarry workers and other immigrants. The *Vermont Life* image of the state as a rural land with spectacular foliage is inadequate in describing a poor state with much rural poverty.

The new field of Popular Culture examines what has been important in the lives of our people. We have found on our Circus Panels that American historians have used the study of circus to increase their understanding of our country's history. There is no better example than Janet M. Davis' exemplary work *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* which examines the circus, in Davis's words, as "A historic and cultural process."<sup>1</sup> Gillian M. Rodgers' recent *Champagne Charley & Pretty Emma: Variety Theatre in the Nineteenth Century* also offers insight into the real experience of people in our country. Rodgers shows that economic downturns can be studied through their impact on Variety performance. In hard times Variety was censored and attacked as contributing to the nation's troubles while it had to adapt to compete for limited customer dollars.

Traditional history is often unpopular with students for good reasons. It is sometimes boring and it offers little insight into the true



The Back Street Flyers, a group of African-American tumblers, learned their craft at the New York School for the Circus Arts, the educational arm of the Big Apple Circus. Big Apple Circus publicity photo.

clusion laws governing Asians who were welcomed to build our railroads, but not to become citizens. Today, the country's demographics are again changing and the longstanding dominance of so-called "whites" is being challenged and resistance to those changes are being mounted. The frontier has long been closed. The



nature of this country. In England, when Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop produced the musical *Oh, What A Lovely War* in 1963, the production, which featured period popular songs, was praised for showing for the first time the World War I from the viewpoint of the enlisted men who bore the brunt of its struggles. Finding the real experience of this country's past is a task in which the study of circus is important. But to do it, we must look at circus critically, from many perspectives.

Who attends performances and why? Who are the performers? Where do they come from? Who are the owners? What are the circumstances that underlie the performances? And what does live performance mean in an increasingly digitalized age? (Are those "live" Metropolitan Opera performances playing in theatres on HD television truly live, or merely simultaneously reproduced?)

Before readily available international travel, before the electronic media, before film and radio brought the world into American homes, and before automobiles and improved roads made travel across the land easy, one of the gateways to the outside world for many Americans was the circus with its exotic animals and people and its exotic images of distant lands. In a time when the world for most was in black and white, circus brought spectacle and color in the vivid lithographs that announced its forthcoming arrival to the colors of its performances. Horses, common everywhere, pulled the circus wagons but also showed what elegant performers horses could be. When this country was primarily rural and isolated, the Uncle Tom shows, minstrel shows and circuses had a value that is hard to imagine. Circus day was a transforming experience for rural communities.

Circus history should not be confused with circus nostalgia as it is for many elderly circus fans who mourn the end of the giant tented circuses they knew in their youth. Those shows were remarkable and we will not see their like again, but what concerns us is why did they flourish and why did they fail? Like the mansions of Newport and elsewhere, giant circuses were dependent on a world in which cheap labor was plentiful. In the days before Social Security, people could run away and start new lives under new names, or just nicknames, on circuses. In a land where unionization was largely confined to crafts until the Great Depression, labor was relatively inexpensive. And again, in those days circuses had little competition. Remember in the film *Dirty Dancing*, how the owner of a borscht belt hotel saw his business evaporate as European travel became a real alternative to a sojourn in the mountains?

Since the advent of the New Circus in the 1970's—Big Apple, Cirque du Soleil, etc.—circus has found a new audience. These circuses are not only popular entertainment, they have also become elite entertainment. As the distance in our society has grown between the wealthy and the rest, these circuses primarily serve the affluent. The new respectability brought on by the gentrification of circuses has led many middle class parents to add circus training to ballet and music training as ways to enrich the lives of their children.

Audiences thrill at the achievements of Circus Smirkus, Vermont's international youth circus, not realizing that the participants' parents pay more than \$4,000 each for their children to get the opportunity to experience a summer under the big top. Circus training has become a profitable business, offering young people skills training that enhances their sense of worth, teaches them cooperation, and fosters physical fitness in a non-competitive environment.

Not all youth circus programs are for the elite. Last year in St. Louis we met members of Jessica Hentoff's Circus Harmony who are largely drawn from St. Louis's inner city. For them, circus training is a transforming experience, not just a cultural add-on.

The financial basis of some circuses has changed. Big Apple, now a giant \$27 million dollar organization, was set up as a not-for-profit educational entity. That designation made sense when its educational programs and its professional program were integrated. During its inaugural year, 1977, the Big Apple Circus featured the Back Street Flyers, a group of African American New York City boys who had emerged from Big Apple's educational program. As the Big Apple Circus transformed into a showcase for international performers, the appearance of performers trained in the education programs in the professional show ended. Although Big Apple continues charitable activities such as its Clown Care® units in pediatric wards of hospitals and its Circus of Senses® that presents performances adapted for special needs children, the link between the ancillary programs and the Big Apple show has disappeared. But in circus terms, the charitable activities are a "great beg" and they are featured in Big Apple fundraising. As a former director of the educational program noted, the tail is now wagging the dog as funds solicited for educational purposes also help support the circus.<sup>2</sup>

Many circus families are themselves historic. It is not unusual to find fifth and sixth generation circus performers. Circus families were once the heart of the circus. The children, such as farm children, contributed to the family's success. Some, such as today's Flying Pages, boast exemplary acts that continue to evolve as members of the families move in and out of leading roles as they age. Jill Pages, the mother, used to star doing triples. Then her son Anthony took over and soon his little sister Mercedes will share the spotlight. But such families are rare in circus today for economic reasons. A horse act or a flying act with seven or eight people is expensive and bookings are hard to come by even in the larger circuses. The Cristiani family had great bareback acts in the thirties and forties, but the bareback star Lucio Cristiani's two sons went on to perform more marketable small trampoline acts and one of the brothers, Armando, has recently left circus just as his children were entering the family act. The endless travel and setting up took its toll and Armando's children, born late in his career, were too young to be important in the act when it was becoming more difficult for him to sustain.

International history has also impacted American circus. After Perestroika Russian performers and acts that had been developed in subsidized Soviet programs came to this country as Russian government support for circuses ended. There was a time when Russian became the second language on Ringling and was heard on smaller circuses as well. Now the influx of new performers comes from Mexico and South America. Even laborers on touring tent circuses, like the wonderful one-ring Kelly-Miller show, are here from Mexico on temporary work permits. We are told that Americans will no longer do this work so Mexicans are imported as are the Jamaicans who come each fall to pick our apples in Vermont. Of course, this work is poorly paid. When all American wages were low, there was no need for immigrant labor.

Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey is no longer The Greatest Show on Earth. The twenty-two units of Cirque du Soleil currently performing around the world dwarf it, but Ringling does reflect a history of economic and cultural change. The premier Golden Age American circus, like its competitors, evolved from rural roots when mud shows traveled in horse drawn caravans from town to town.

Ringling has more than a 130 year history of capitalist endeavor that grew, like our steel industries, at the end of the nineteenth century. Ringling Brothers developed as the wily and earnestly respectable five Ringling brothers grew year by year, finally purchasing Barnum and Bailey, its main competitor, late in 1907. The



gentility which the Ringlings insisted on in their show, which was derided by its competitors as a Sunday School Show, was similar to the gentrification that was taking place in Variety performance and which was accompanying the evolution of the middle class in the late nineteenth century.

Today, Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey is part of Feld Entertainment Inc., which is in its own words "the world's largest producer of live family entertainment"<sup>3</sup> which includes the Disney on Ice Shows, the live Disney shows, and Feld Motor Sport, "the premier producer of specialized arena and stadium based motorsports such as Monster Jam®, Monster Energy®, Supercross, AMA Arenacross Series and other high energy motorsports."<sup>4</sup> The Feld website video clips indicate that all of the programs are presented with the technologic élan of rock concerts and rival the performances of Cirque du Soleil.

Back when Ringling Brothers tent show traveled in large trains, sometimes as many as four, the old one-ring circus with its talking and singing clowns was replaced by an ever growing tent that eventually could hold 15,000 people. So that all could see something, multiple rings developed—eventually Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey had three rings and four stages offering simultaneous performances. In the twenties and thirties there were stars in the center ring such as Lillian Leitzel, May Wirth, Alfred Codona, the Hanneford and Cristiani bareback troupes. The other rings were filled with less well-known performers. No one could see it all. The extravagance of the giant shows was their appeal. Although the clowns appeared in a few acts—such as the burning house and its occupants that were saved from destruction by the clown firemen—clowns were mostly relegated to sight gags in their walk-arounds that distracted the audience while props were changed. Instead of a single star clown such as Dan Rice or Johnny Patterson in the one-ring shows, you had many anonymous clowns in the multi-ring shows.

The performances of the Golden Age shows was analogous to what was going on in our giant factories. Not only were the tents erected and traveling cites established on a daily basis with well honed precision, a visit to the circus was similar to a visit to an automobile factory. Except instead of cars, what was produced was highly organized performances.

Interestingly, it is Cirque du Soleil with its extravagant New Age, somewhat surreal, high tech productions that most resembles the giant circuses of the Golden Age although now there is a single ring or rather, a single performing space. As in the Busby Berkely musicals of the 1930's, it is the effect, not individual performers, that is the point of it all. The lighting, costumes, makeup, music and production values create—like the Golden Age Circus—something that is almost beyond comprehension. It offers the sensory overload that I associate with the "Kill Colgate" football rallies I watched as a neighborhood kid on the Syracuse University campus when I was young. I found the rallies terrifying. Later, when I saw *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Reifenstahl's documentary film about Hitler's political rallies, I felt the same way. I suggest that there is some of that in Cirque du Soleil which exalts not the excellence of its performers so much as the awesomeness of its productions. Instead of a message of Aryan superiority, there is a feel-good invocation of exquisite, expensive taste. Every element of Cirque du Soleil reminds you that you are sharing an expensive, elite experience. Am I the only one who finds the Cirque performances as frightening as they are enchanting? Are there political implications to this kind of mindless, impersonal activity which is presented in portentous and pretentious terms—just try reading a Cirque du Soleil program that attempts to explain the significance of the experience.



By the mid-1990s some Cirque du Soleil productions were dark and disquieting as is this image from the program of the 1994-1995 North American tour of *Allegria*. The program itself is full of faux profundities such as: "If you have no voice scream; if you have no legs, run; if you have no hope, invent." Pfening Archives.

But the economics of the Cirque du Soleil and the Golden Age circuses are different. Cirque du Soleil, founded by Canadian street performers, was helped in its early years by government subsidy. Later, with its many units and its giant training center in Montreal it was more than self sufficient and was cited as a prize industry in Quebec.

Today our nation is faced by crises and by opportunities. Perhaps an understanding of the forces that faced us in the past as well at those still facing us can be found in a critical understanding of our history. The study of circus history can help us achieve that understanding. **BW**

#### Footnotes

1. Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill & London: UNC Press, 2002) p. 15.
2. Viveca Gardiner, phone interview, December 5, 1997.
3. Feld Entertainment Company Profile, <http://www.feldentertainment.com>, p. 1, 10/2008.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.



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